



IRAQI KURDS AND NATION-BUILDING

Mohammed M. A. Ahmed



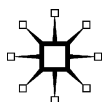
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MOHAMMED M. A. AHMED
(HAMA JAMAL)

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Dedicated to my sons
Shawn and Diar
and grandchildren
Lily, Miles, August, Viola, Cyrus, and Marli

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DR. MOHAMMED M. A. AHMED
February 13, 2012

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Foreword

It is a delight for me to write the foreword to Mohammed Ahmed's new study of the Kurds in Iraq since the US invasion of that country in March 2003. It is an extremely timely book. At the end of December 2011, the United States withdrew the last of its combat troops from Iraq as stipulated in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) of November 2008. Many analysts of the war thought that the United States would be able to compel the Nouri al-Maliki government to extend the SOFA well into 2012 and beyond. But opposition within al-Maliki's State of Law political coalition, especially from Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters, persuaded al-Maliki that if he wanted to retain the prime ministership with any degree of certainty or effectiveness, he would have to stick to his announced position that all US combat troops should be out of Iraq by the end of December 2011. To the United States' dismay, al-Maliki's government agreed to allow it to keep only about thirty-five hundred of the seventeen thousand military, security, diplomatic, and other technical advisers it had planned to keep in its embassy, the largest in the world,, leaving much of its space vacant.

Mohammed Ahmed's *America Unravels Iraq: Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis Compete for Supremacy*, published in 2010, is undoubtedly the best book yet dealing with developments in Iraq that so vitally affect the peoples of that country, especially the Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds. In *America Unravels Iraq*, Ahmed explains in detail the profound struggle for power among these three major ethnic and religious groups in Iraq and the historical reversal of power resulting from the US invasion of that country in which the Shi'a replaced Sunnis as the dominant power. It was an historic and remarkable turn of events of which the reverberations continue. It takes an insightful and sagacious intelligence to understand and analyze such an unprecedented turn of events. As a Kurd and a native of Iraq, lecturing at Baghdad University as well as earning a PhD at the Oklahoma State University, Mohammed Ahmed acquired the language tools, experience, and education to make him one of the major social scientists and policymakers regarding the formulating and implementing of economic and social development programs throughout the countries of the Middle East

and Southwest Asia. It is this wide and expansive experience in Iraq and other Arab countries that makes *American Unravels Iraq* the preeminent study of the struggle of power among Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds after the March 2003 US invasion of that country.

And, now, two years later, he has authored another magnificent study, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building*, which can be read as a sequel to his *America Unravels Iraq*. Unlike the first study, which dealt with the panoply of vicissitudes affecting the relations and politics of the three major groups—Sunnis, Shi'a, and Kurds—contesting for power in Iraq as a result of the US invasion and occupation, the present study focuses on the politics of Kurds in Iraq. It is the first study of the Kurds of Iraq and the politics affecting them since the American invasion and occupation. This in itself makes Ahmed's book unique. It is all the more unique because he is the only author and analyst I know of who uses Arabic, Kurdish, as well as English sources. One of the strangest and most telling features of the long American debacle in Iraq is that few of the authors and analysts writing about developments in that country know Arabic in any meaningful sense. It is as though a French scholar of the United States is a major professor of American history at the Sorbonne and knows no English!

The great merit of this study, among many, is that Ahmed is successful in extricating, insofar as it is possible, the major developments in the history and politics of the Kurds of Iraq from that of the Shi'a and Sunni Arabs. This in itself is a major achievement, which enriches his study and makes it a valuable contribution to the history of the Kurds of Iraq as well as the state of Iraq. Future historians of the Kurds, Iraq, and the Middle East as well as American diplomatic historians, and other historians, will have to turn to these two magisterial books to obtain a meaningful account of what took place among the Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds during these eventful years.

Ahmed's study is especially valuable in that it explores in depth not just the politics of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) but of the its two major components—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Massoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), headed by Jalal Talabani, who also became the president of Iraq in 2005. Ahmed's deep knowledge of Kurdish politics allows him to disentangle the politics of the KRG in Arbil from that of the government in Baghdad, which also included/includes a number of Kurdish politicians and ministers. It must be noted that throughout most of the period that Ahmed analyzes, not only the president, but also the foreign minister of Iraq was a Kurd. Ahmed's acquaintance and knowledge of many of the personalities of whom he writes makes his study of vital importance for anyone interested in the politics of Iraq during this crucial period.

By the end of 2011 it was clear that neither Jalal Talabani nor Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, the two top Kurds in Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of the Law government, would be able to contribute much to development of stability in Arab Iraq between Shiites and Sunnis and the factions among them—let alone Kurdistan Iraq. It was also clear at the end of 2011 that Iraq was in a holding position until al-Maliki's government and the United States agreed on just what the relations between the government of Iraq and the US would be in the wake of withdrawal of US combat troops, especially regarding remaining US security personnel. But the KRG had made it clear several times over that it would accept some American presence within the KRG, including basing rights for US air and missile presence. As Ahmed makes clear in chapters eight, nine, and ten, the Kurds of Iraq wanted to make sure that they would be able to withstand any attack from Arab Iraq in the coming years as well as attacks from Turkey or Iran. At the end of 2011, it seemed likely that the unraveling of Iraq would continue into the foreseeable future.

It was also clear to the leadership of the KRG by the end of 2011 that the United States did not want to or was unable to do much regarding the "disputed territories." The name applies to those lands lying between Sunni areas of Arab Iraq and the KRG comprising some 8 percent of Iraq's total land mass. The disputed territories included regions in all four provinces—Nineveh, Salahadin, Kirkuk (Ta'amim), and Diyala—adjacent to the KRG. The United States and the United Nations also did little to move forward the negotiations between Arbil and Baghdad regarding Kirkuk province (*muhafaza*), the status of which remained uncertain at the end of 2011. Despite the basic pro-American position of the Kurds of Iraq, Washington did little to support Kurdish positions regarding both the disputed territories and the status of Kirkuk.

It should be noted that the two most important commanding generals of US Armed Forces in Iraq during this vital period of Iraq's history, Generals David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno, also gave little support to Kurdish positions. Petraeus was commander of US and Multi-National Forces in Iraq before he was appointed commander of US and Multi-National Forces in Afghanistan on July 4, 2010; he then became director of the Central Intelligence Agency in September 2011. Odierno served as commanding general US Forces—Iraq from October 2008 through September 2010. He also played a prominent role in the planning of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and its subsequent occupation. He played an especially prominent role vis-à-vis the Kurds when he was commander of US and Multi-National Forces in northern Iraq. These facts are especially important because they show that both Petraeus and Odierno played strong roles in the so-called surge of American troops in 2007–2008, which resulted in

many of the Sunni resistance forces laying down their arms to supposedly cooperate with the government in Baghdad.

As Ahmed notes, the positions that Petraeus and Odierno adopted in Iraq during their service influenced immensely the policies of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. This placed the Kurds of Iraq in the dilemma of allying with an occupying force, which supported their “autonomy” within Iraq, but only a limited autonomy, which would not restrict the policies of Washington to pursue a policy of a “unified” Iraq with a decentralized government. Such policies mean that the Kurds of Iraq will be faced with many challenges in the coming years.

In chapters nine and ten, Ahmed deals with one of the central theses of his book: KRG’s relations with Turkey. He documents the strong position that Turkey has achieved in the KRG as a result of the KRG’s policies to establish good relations with Ankara and the conundrum of KRG leaders who felt compelled to foster good relations with Turkey in order to achieve political and military leverage against Baghdad and to satisfy the geopolitical demands of Washington. A bigger cause for concern for the KRG decision makers was the dilemma they faced regarding the extent to which they felt compelled to cooperate with Ankara against the PKK and PJAK (Party of Free Life in Kurdistan), a Kurdish nationalist group affiliated with the PKK, with bases in KRG territory, albeit mountainous, near the Iranian and Turkish borders, and who were fighting Iranian armed forces. Armed conflict in this region occurred throughout August, September, and October 2011. Differences between PJAK and Iran seemed to be somewhat resolved when PJAK forces agreed to withdraw from Iranian territory in October 2011. This, in turn, soured further relations between Iran and Turkey, as Ankara was counting on Tehran to join it in fighting PJAK in northern Iraq.

The intertwining politics between the Kurdistan nationalist movements in northern Iraq and Turkey had become patently clear after the June 12, 2011, national election in Turkey in which the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP) secured a strong majority in parliament, which the AKP interpreted as a license to attempt to destroy the PKK and its urban affiliate the Kurdistan Communities Union, or Koma Ciwaken Kurdistan (Kurdish-KCK), and to weaken the largely Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi-BDP). Ankara and Washington demanded the KRG leadership acquiesce to their suppression of the PKK and KCK and the weakening of the BDP.

Mohammed Ahmed is one of the few scholars with all of the necessary linguistic abilities, scholarly capabilities, sound analysis, good judgment, and political wisdom to unravel the closely interfacing politics, problems,

and challenges that await the Kurds of northern Iraq and their leaders. It is a marvelous book and I highly recommend it to all people interested in the Kurds, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, the United States, and the future of the peoples of the Middle East.

ROBERT OLSON
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February 12, 2012*

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Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France-Presse
AIA	Arbil International Airport
AKP	Justice and Development Party
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CHP	Republican People's Party
CPJ	Committee for Defending Journalists
DAMAC	United Arab Emirates Real Estate
DTP	Democratic Society Party
GE	General Electric
HADEP	Participatory Democracy Party
HAKPAR	Rights and Liberty Party
IA	Iraqi Alliance
IC	Investment Commission
IGC	Iraqi Governing Council
IL	Iraqiya List
KA	Kurdistani Alliance
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party- Syria
KIU	Kurdistan Islamic Union
KIG	Kurdistan Islamic Group
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRP	Kurdistan Regional Parliament
KSPC	Kurdistan Supreme Political Council
MGK	Turkey's National Security Council
MIT	National Intelligence Organization
MHP	National Movement Party- Turkey
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PJAK	Kurdistan Free Life Party or Partiya Jiani Azadi Kurdistan
PKK	Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers Party)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PUKS	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan-Syria
PYD	Democratic Union Party-Syria
RRT	United States Reconstruction Team
RSF	Reporters without Border
SIIC	Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council
SNC	Syrian National Council
TAL	Transitional Administrative Law
TRT	Turkish Radio and Television Corporation
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq



Map courtesy of the International Crisis Group.

Introduction

Most Kurds, who had lived within the periphery of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, identified themselves as Muslim first and Kurd second until shortly after World War I. However, the Kurdish mindset changed after the Young Turks, remnants of the Ottoman Empire, started campaigning for a Turkish rather than an Islamic state, which had encompassed the entire Middle East Muslim community (Umma) regardless of sect, ethnicity, or tribal origin.¹ Prior to World War I, the loyalty of the Kurds was largely vested in their sheikhs and tribal chiefs, who were directly attached to the caliph in Istanbul.² The Kurds had considerable difficulty in detaching themselves from the Turkish colonizers who had ruled them for centuries in the name of the Islamic Umma.³ The Ottoman and Safavid Empires divided Kurdistan between them following the battle of Chaldiran in 1514 and formalized the borderline at the Treaty of Zuhab in 1639.⁴

The Ottoman Empire maintained control of its Kurdish population through the policy of divide and conquer by rewarding loyal tribal, religious, and community leaders in accordance with their social ranks. The Kurds, who were ruled by Ottoman and Persian empires from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, came under the newly established governments of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria following World War I.⁵

Since the Kurds were dispersed in a rugged mountainous region dissected by deep fertile valleys and riverbeds, it became difficult for them to establish large urban centers of excellence, such as Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo, that would facilitate greater cultural and political cohesion and consolidate their national identity as a distinct ethnic group of people. It therefore became difficult for social and political activists to rally large-scale rebellions and organize Kurdish tribes behind them during World War I from across Kurdistan. The Kurds also lacked a strong charismatic leader with a vision to put up a strong resistance by reunifying Persian and Ottoman Kurds to prevent Western allies from further fragmenting Kurdistan.

In order to justify their action, the Western allies projected the Kurds as a bunch of rebellious and uncivilized tribes, who could not be tamed

except by melting them into the neighboring, more civilized Arab, Persian, and Turkish communities. This same stigma, attached to the Kurds by Britain during World War I, was later used by the Turks, Arabs, and Persians in order to justify their suppressive measures to assimilate their Kurdish population.

In the absence of political and social cohesion, strong charismatic leaders, social and political organizations, and a common agenda, the fragmentary revolts by Sheikh Said Piran in Turkey, Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji and Mullah Mustafa Barzani in Iraq, and Qazi Mohammed in Iran were easily quashed by the emerging Turkish, Arab, and Persian nationalist armies.⁶ Unbent by their oppressive rulers, who tried to assimilate them, Kurdish activists continued seeking appropriate opportunities to achieve their national goals.⁷

Britain Creates Iraq

In pursuit of its strategic interests, Great Britain, as a powerful member of the Western allies in the Middle East, stripped from the old Ottoman Empire the provinces of Basra, dominated by Shiite Arabs; Baghdad, dominated by Sunni Arabs; and Mosul, dominated by Kurds, to create the state of Iraq. Britain's main interest was in the protection of its trade route from India to the Mediterranean basin and in Iraq's oil resources, especially the northern oil fields in Kirkuk.⁸

In line with earlier diplomatic and political norms established by the Ottomans in the Middle East, Britain's initial task was to install a government dominated by Sunni Arabs, who accounted for about 20 percent of the population, and to suppress the Kurds in the north and the Shiite majority in the south. Britain exploited rivalries between Kurdish tribal Sheikhs and Mullahs in order to contain the incoherent Kurdish rebellions in Barzan and Sulaimaniya regions.

In the absence of a cohesive Kurdish opposition and clear national guidelines, it became easy for Britain to contain the Kurdish uprisings by applying a carrot-and-stick policy, rewarding those who cooperated and punishing those who opposed. Although their random uprisings in Iraq were easily suppressed, the Kurds refused to be treated as second-class citizens, demanding equality with Arabs, and called for an autonomous Kurdish region within a democratic Iraq.⁹ British and Iraqi officials denied the Kurdish demands, describing them as unrealistic.

In the face of the growing Arab nationalism, the Kurds soon created their own brand of nationalism (Kurdayati), leading to the emergence of

underground Kurdish political parties and social clubs aimed at reviving and preserving their own cultural heritage and language and recalling their own history, unlike those imposed on them in Arabic-teaching public schools. Successive Sunni Arab-dominated governments in Baghdad outlawed not only Kurdish political parties and newspapers, but also Kurdish social clubs. Although the Iraqi Kurds were free to speak their language at home and in public, their children could not read or write in Kurdish or recall their own history.

The government and Arab streets brought to bear considerable social and political pressure on the Kurds to melt them into what Arab nationalists called the Arab melting pot. Kurdish children were under daily pressure at schools and in the streets to become either part of the Arab melting pot or be shunned as outsiders. This writer faced similar problems throughout his primary and secondary schools. Even when he started lecturing at Baghdad University, he was often pressed by his Arab colleagues not to refer to his birthplace as Kurdistan but as the beloved north (Shimal al-Habib).

In the absence of Kurdish schools or courses, Kurdish students were obliged to learn and speak Arabic at school and in public places, especially in predominantly Arab-speaking cities such as Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. Despite having many of their own heroes and heroines and a long history, Kurdish students had to learn Arab history and culture. Those Kurds who demanded equality and recognition of their identity ended up in prison and blacklisted, depriving them of equal employment opportunities.

The discriminatory practices against the Kurds by British officials, who were strongly pro-Arab, became a norm under sovereign Iraq. The more Arab nationalism gained prominence, the more the Kurds became alienated from the central Iraqi government and felt that it was incumbent upon them to either embrace Arab culture or be deprived of public employment opportunities. The unwillingness of successive Arab governments in Baghdad to address Kurdish grievances led to periodic Kurdish rebellion, bloodshed, destruction, mass punishment, and internal displacement.

Frustrated by its inability to assimilate the Kurds through schooling, propaganda campaigns, media, social, and political pressure, the government further tightened the screws on the Kurds, especially in 1968 when the Ba'ath Party government replaced Arab nationalists (Nasserites). The Ba'athists shifted gears from a gradual Arabization of the Kurds and their region to a large-scale ethnic cleansing and population relocation with a view to expediting the assimilation of the Kurdish population.¹⁰

The Kurds endured horrendous suffering in the hands of the government immediately following the collapse of the Kurdish uprising in 1975 and at the end of the 1980–1988 Iraq-Iran War. The government accused

the Kurds of betraying their own country by taking sides with Iran during the war. The Ba'ath government launched a scorched-earth policy, code-named Anfal (spoils of war), against the Kurds, aimed at their extermination as a people. The new policy resulted in the destruction of about four thousand Kurdish villages and towns in 1988, mass murder, disappearances, dispersal of the Kurdish population to Arab parts of Iraq, and gassing of some two hundred Kurdish villages, including the town of Halabja, where more than five thousand women, men, and children met their fate. This writer visited Halabja in March 2010 and witnessed the graves of those killed during aerial attacks on the town in 1988.¹¹ These horrific events should have provided the Kurds with sufficient justifications to declare independence immediately following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, while the issue was still hot and fresh. Over three hundred mass graves of Kurds of all ages, including women and children, were discovered in Iraq's desert near the Saudi Arabia's border and in southern Iraq during the US occupation of Iraq (2003–2011).

The Muslim world, including Turkey and the Arab League, maintained total silence in the face of Saddam Hussein's crimes against humanity, reflecting their "traditional contempt" for the Kurds.¹² Washington officially acknowledged Saddam Hussein's crimes against the Kurds only when the US president George W. Bush looked for justifications to attack Iraq in 2003.

Ali Hassan al-Majid, Saddam Hussein's cousin, who won the nickname of Chemical Ali, "was convicted Sunday [January 17, 2010] of crimes against humanity and received his fourth death sentence; this time for involvement in one of the worst poison gas attacks ever against civilians [Kurds]."¹³ The Kurds disputed the court's decision of describing al-Majid's crimes as crimes against humanity. Instead, they argued that they had ample evidence to define al-Majid's crimes as genocide because, in his own words, he tried to exterminate the entire Kurdish population.¹⁴ Families of victims in the court "cheered when the judge handed down the guilty verdict in a trial for the poison gas attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988 that killed 5,600 people."¹⁵ Other former regime officials implicated in the attack included Sultan Hashim al-Taie, former defense minister; Sabir Aziz al-Duri, director of military intelligence, and Farhan Mutlaq al-Jubouri, former military intelligence officer, who were given 15-year prison terms.

Iraqi Kurds felt cheated at the hanging of Saddam Hussein at the end of December 2005 for the death of 141 Shiites in the town of Dujail and not for the chemical attacks on Halabja and for massacring 182,000 Kurds during the Anfal campaign in 1988.¹⁶ Although al-Taie had already been sentenced to death during the first trial of Chemical Ali, President Jalal

Talabani, a Kurd, and his vice president Tariq al-Hashimi, Sunni Arab and former Iraqi army officer, refused to sign his death sentence. While al-Hashimi claimed that al-Taie was just a soldier carrying out Saddam's order, Talabani claimed that he was a conscientious objector to death sentences. While approving the death sentences of al-Majid and al-Taie, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite Arab, called on the Presidency Council to ratify them.¹⁷ Many Halabja residents and their children, who were exposed to the deadly cocktail of chemicals, and who continued to suffer from cancer and deformities years after the attack, called for al-Majid to be executed in their city.

Two of Saddam Hussein's brothers, Wathban and Saba'awi al-Hassan, who were responsible for the deaths of Baghdad merchants, mostly Faily Kurds, were also sentenced to death during the initial trials of al-Majid, but their sentences were carried out only in July 2009. The US military and diplomatic corps in Baghdad had a hand in staying their sentences in order to contain the Sunni Arab insurgency. Saddam Hussein's prime minister, Tariq Aziz, a Christian, received only 15 years imprisonment despite being one of Saddam Hussein's closest confidants and decision makers.¹⁸ While Saddam Hussein's sentence was implemented on a timely basis, those of his cronies dragged on for political expediency. The timing of the execution of the convicted felons was influenced by power politics. The Kurds alleged that the US- and the Shiite-dominated government undervalued the Kurdish blood.

Chemical Ali was hanged on January 25, 2010, a week after receiving his fourth death sentence on January 17, 2010.¹⁹ *The Boston Globe* wrote that al-Majid "bore a striking resemblance to Hussein and was one of the most brutal members of the dictator's inner circle. The 5,000 dead in the single attack in Halabja represents the biggest chemical weapons attack against civilians in history."²⁰ Al-Majid rose from a motorcycle messenger to general and headed the Ministry of Defense from 1991 to 1995. In a recording presented to the court, al-Majid was heard vowing "to leave no Kurd [alive] who speaks the Kurdish language."²¹ Observers wondered if Iraq's Kurds would ever trust Arabs and be willing to live with them in the same country.

Iraqi Kurds were rescued from their misery, at least temporarily, by not-so-willing Gulf War Western allies, who established a safe haven zone to protect them from the Iraqi army retreating from Kuwait in 1991. The 2003 Iraq War afforded the Iraqi Kurds further opportunities to lay the building blocks of a de facto Kurdish state, but fell short of helping them gain independence. The purpose of this book is to shed light on the manner in which the Kurds built the foundation of their de facto state during 1991–2012 and their future prospects in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Chapter 1

Emergence of Kurdistan Regional Government

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) emerged from the ashes of the 1991 Gulf War, when the Iraqi army occupied Kuwait during August 1990 under the pretext that it was part of Iraq. The Western allies described Kuwait's occupation by Iraq as a flagrant aggression against its neighbor. Failing to convince Iraqi president Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces peacefully, the Western allies expelled the Iraqi army by force from Kuwait in early 1991. In response to a call by the US president George H. W. Bush, Iraqi Kurds and Shiites rose up against Saddam, mistakenly thinking that the Western allies would protect them from the Iraqi army.

The retreating Iraqi army from Kuwait launched retaliatory aerial and ground attacks on Kurdish and Shiite communities, killing thousands of Kurds while making many others homeless. The Iraqi army brutally punished the Kurdish population for rising up against the central government by chasing them out of their homes in the middle of winter to the snow-capped mountains of Kurdistan. Out of pity for the fleeing Kurds, who were suffering from exposure, starvation, and diseases along an Iraq-Turkish border, the Western allies and Turkey helped to pass UN resolution 688 in order to create a safe haven zone and entice stranded Kurds to a lower ground, where they could be properly treated, sheltered, and fed.¹ Ankara acted out of concern for Turkey's stability in order to prevent the flow of thousands of Iraq's Kurds into Turkey while fighting its own Kurdish rebels, Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK), demanding autonomy.

The UN resolution internationalized the Kurdish question by mentioning the Kurds for the first time since 1923 and empowered the United

Nations for the first time to intervene in the internal affairs of a member state such as Iraq.² The resolution called for “ensuring the territorial integrity and independence of the nation [Iraq] under a democratic constitutional, parliamentary and pluralistic structure,” and demanded “the end of the repression of the Iraqi people.”³

Emboldened by Western military protection, Kurdish *peshmarga* (daring death) fighters liberated the rest of Duhok as well as Arbil, Sulaimaniya provinces, and parts of Arabized Kurdish territories from the Iraqi army. However, the Western allies obliged Kurdish fighters to withdraw from Arabized Kurdish territories (disputed areas) to the boundaries of the aforementioned three provinces, which were turned into a safe haven zone, lying above the 36th parallel. The safe haven zone essentially covered the autonomous Kurdish region, which Saddam Hussein had drawn in 1976 after changing the administrative boundaries of these three provinces in favor of adjacent Arab districts. The landmass of the Kurdistan Region shrank from about 29,000 to 22,000 square miles, compared to Iraq’s total landmass of 262,000 miles, most of which is desert.⁴ Some 40 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan (disputed areas) was still under government control in early 2012.

While appreciating the positive outcome of the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurds resented leaving their brethren under the central government, which failed to protect them from Arab insurgent groups during the 2003 Iraq War. Neither the United States, nor Turkey, nor Baghdad wanted the Kurds to control the oil-rich Kirkuk province, fearing that might provide the Kurds with sufficient resources and landmass to declare independence. They claimed Kurdish independence would destabilize Iraq and the neighboring states with a large Kurdish minority.

From the 1991 Gulf War until the US invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003, the central government continued cleansing Kurdish areas under its control from their indigenous Kurdish population with a view to irreversibly changing their demographic character in favor of Arabs.⁵ Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s government in March 2003, the Kurdish exclusion zone, which the United States and the Shiite-dominated government called “disputed areas,” turned into a bone of contention for inter-ethnic rivalries, which some called a “trigger line.” Arab settlers, supported by the United States, Arabs, and Turkey, opposed the return of thousands of internally displaced Kurds, estimated at about 800,000 people, to their homes and farms.⁶ Many Kurds described the allied action in the Kurdistan Region as an international conspiracy against them. Instead of enabling the displaced Kurds to return to their homes, Arab settlers and insurgents have since 2003 pushed more Kurds out of the disputed areas.⁷

A year after the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from the safe haven zone, the Kurds emerged from their tragic past with considerable vigor and optimism.⁸

The two major Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), held free elections in the three provinces they controlled in 1992 and established the Kurdistan Regional Parliament (KRP) in the shadow of the Western forces.⁹ They turned their poorly armed *peshmarga* fighters into a regional defense force that would maintain peace and stability in the region. Instead of declaring independence, the nascent regional government articulated a constitution, envisioning a largely autonomous Kurdistan Region within the framework of a federal democratic Iraq that would grant them maximum autonomy. By so doing, the Kurdish leadership sent a message to Baghdad that they would not return to the fold unless the central government made major changes in the former Iraqi constitution.

The Kurds initially angered Iraqi Arabs, neighboring Arab states, Iran, and Turkey, who feared that the Kurds were on their way to separation from Iraq and destabilizing the region. Under pressure from Washington and Turkey, the Kurdish leadership agreed not to declare independence but to seek autonomy within a democratic federal system of government in Iraq.

Despite political ideological discord between the KDP and the PUK and the neighboring countries' occasional threats and intimidations, the Kurds were able to create a secure and stable environment that was conducive for private and public investment. The Kurdistan Region witnessed unprecedented economic growth, revealing the dynamic and creative aspects of Kurdish society.¹⁰ Some pundits thought that the KRG, which had afforded its citizens more freedoms than their neighbors, could serve as a model for the rest of Iraq. Since the 1920s, successive Arab governments in Baghdad had deprived the region of capital investment and development programs in order to encourage its population to seek employment opportunities elsewhere in the country, and encouraged Arab settlers from center and south to move north.

The lack of trust and transparency, residues of past animosity, and reluctance to share border tariffs equally led to a bitter war between KDP and PUK followers during 1994–1998, splitting the regional administration into two, one in Arbil and the other in Sulaimaniya. The conflict between the two parties boiled over into a Kurdish civil war, killing, maiming, and dislocating thousands of Kurds.¹¹ Although the bloody civil war almost ripped the Kurdish community apart, the KDP and the PUK returned to their senses when they realized that their people would damn them forever if they squandered the opportunity created by the 1991 Gulf War for laying the foundation of a Kurdish state in Iraq. Although the KDP and the PUK reconciled some of their differences in 1998 in Washington, they failed to reunify their shadow ministries in Sulaimaniya and Arbil until several years later.

While the Kurds had not yet reaped the full fruits of the opportunity created by the 1991 Gulf War, the threat of a new war against Iraq gathered momentum following the September 11, 2001, al-Qa'ida attacks on New York and Washington. The US administration under President George W. Bush thought that Iraq was a fair target for retaliation because of its ties to al-Qa'ida and for pursuing a nuclear weapons program.¹²

Despite their differences, the KDP and the PUK functioned as a united front in advance of the 2003 war while negotiating their terms to join the Iraqi Arab opposition against Baghdad. The 2003 war accorded Iraqi Kurds further opportunities to bolster their political, economic, and security gains. From 2003 to 2012, the KRG administration proved that the Kurds were capable of self-rule and of developing their own region independent of the rest of Iraq, which was entrenched in a bitter civil war between Sunni and Shiite Arabs. Despite their own internal disputes, the Kurds demonstrated to the world that they were nation-builders, peace-makers, and entrepreneurs, and not a bunch of thieves, highway robbers, and illiterate people, as their neighbors had described them before.

While building the pillars of a state, Kurdish officials were deeply engaged in promoting peace and stability in the rest of Iraq by mediating between the Sunni and Shiite communities who were at loggerheads. The neighboring states, who opposed Kurdish national ambitions, were helpless in the face of the growing political fortunes of the Kurds, mainly because of the complexity of the political and military situation in Iraq. The Kurds' constructive attitude, mild manners, and diplomatic skills turned many of their adversaries into friends. They vigorously campaigned to attract foreign investors, entrepreneurs, diplomatic missions, and traders to their region, which they turned into a vibrant society with a flourishing economy, while the rest of Iraq was still in shambles.¹³

Preparation for the 2003 Iraq War

In preparing for the war, Washington earmarked some \$90 million to mobilize Iraqi opposition groups in Diaspora and the Iraq's Kurdistan Region against Saddam Hussein's government. The Kurds did not initially receive the news about a US-led war enthusiastically, fearing that the United States might replace Saddam Hussein with a friendlier Ba'ath Party leader, who might haunt them again. Before making a firm commitment to the US and Iraqi opposition, the Kurds tried to test the waters in order to see if Saddam Hussein was willing to offer them better terms than in the past for autonomy. The Kurds argued that since Saddam Hussein

was under UN economic sanctions and US war threats, he might be more responsive to their demands than other Arab nationalists who might replace him. However, the Kurds soon discovered that Saddam Hussein was not in any mood to compromise on his Arab nationalist ideals.

The Kurds initiated contacts with Saddam Hussein not only to test his intentions toward them but also to bolster their bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States and Iraqi opposition groups in Diaspora. The Kurds made it clear to the opposition that they would join them provided they agree to establish a federal democratic system of government, recognize the KRG authority, resolve the issue of Arabized Kurdish territories, share oil revenue equitably, recognize Kurdish on a par with Arabic, share key government positions with the Kurds, and redesign Iraq's national flag to reflect its multiethnic character.¹⁴ During a meeting in Salahaddin, Arbil province, Iraqi opposition groups "approved the right of the Kurds to determine their future without secession and within the framework of the single Iraqi homeland."¹⁵

Under the US and regional pressure, the Kurdish leadership turned its back on its own people, who aspired to independence, and focused on limited autonomy within Iraq's existing boundaries. After committing themselves to Iraq's unity, Kurdish politicians tried to sell the concept of federalism to Arab opposition groups in an effort to ensure the continuity of their regional government. In the absence of better alternatives, the Kurdish leadership agreed to cooperate with the United States and Arab opposition groups to overthrow Saddam Hussein first and then start negotiating terms of their autonomy with Arab opposition groups.

From the outset, neither the United States nor Arab opposition groups made concrete promises to the Kurds, except for saying that the final shape of their autonomy would be subject to future negotiations. In line with their experience, the Kurds were wary and distrustful of not only the United States, but also Shiite and Sunni Arab opposition groups' intentions. For this reason, the Kurds preempted the 2003 war by preparing a document entitled the "constitution," which defined the KRG's relationship with post-Saddam Hussein era governments in Baghdad. The document, which was approved by the KRP in 1992 was received with considerable skepticism by Arab opposition groups.¹⁶

The Kurds made concerted efforts to sensitize the Arab opposition groups through conferences and bilateral discussions about the utility of a federal system of government for the people of Iraq. During a meeting in New York on November 29, 1999, the concept of the parliamentary democratic federal system of government was discussed by citing concrete examples.¹⁷ The same concept was debated again at a US-sponsored conference in London during December 14–17, 2002, as well as in Salahadin

(Arbil) in March 2003, which was attended by the US ambassador at large, Zalmay Khalilzad. The Salahadin conference recommended that the issue of federalism be incorporated in the new Iraqi constitution and submitted to nationwide referendum.¹⁸

While some Arab opposition groups politely nodded to the Kurdish proposal, others accused the Kurds of promoting federalism as a prelude to separation from Iraq. As for the United States, it was ambivalent about the issue, describing it as an internal matter. US officials told the Kurds that the final status of the KRG and other Kurdish grievances should be settled through negotiations with a legitimately elected government in Baghdad.¹⁹

The United States used the Iraqi opposition groups to whitewash its real strategic political agenda in Iraq and the Middle East. The US president George W. Bush, who was determined to invade Iraq, tried to create an illusion in the media that it was the Iraqi people and not the United States who wanted to overthrow the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad. The British ambassador to the United Nations, Jeremy Greenstock, said, "The United States was 'hell bent' on a 2003 military invasion of Iraq and actively undermined efforts by Britain to win international authorization for the war."²⁰

By joining the Iraqi opposition groups, consisting of mishmashes of Shiite and Sunni Arab political factions, the Kurds gave their movement a real meaning since they were the only group who had a foothold on Iraqi soil. By openly aligning themselves with the Americans, the Kurds made themselves a fair target for verbal and physical attacks by Arab nationalists and radical Islamic groups, who singled them out as traitors, infidels, and as belonging to a US fifth column.

The 2006 PUK-KDP Reunification Accord

In January 2006, the PUK and the KDP reconfirmed their commitment to reunify their two "administrations within the autonomous region of Kurdistan, bringing all three of the provinces [Duhok, Arbil, and Sulaimaniya] under single administration,"²¹ which split during the 1994–1998 civil war. It took some seven years (1998–2006) of intermittent negotiations for the two parties to build sufficient trust to reunify the two subadministrations. The accord, which was struck on January 7, 2006, set "detailed terms for sharing executive power between the KDP and the PUK."²² Despite their differences, KDP and PUK politicians functioned as a front in dealing with the central government on issues pertaining to Kurdish interests.²³

The new accord served not only as a confidence-building measure but also set a long-term framework for power sharing between the KDP and the PUK in Arbil and Baghdad. While the accord brought the KDP and the PUK closer together, as long-term partners, it disenfranchised smaller parties from a fair share of power. In view of the importance of the accord as a roadmap for maintaining the security and the stability of the Kurdistan Region, an elaborate arrangement was made for signing it at the KRP by inviting foreign dignitaries as well as American diplomatic and military corps to the event. Adnan Mufti, speaker of the parliament, opened a special parliamentary session in Arbil on January 21, 2006, by welcoming the attendees, including the ambassadors of the United States (Zalmay Khalilzad), United Kingdom, Iran, Japan, and other foreign dignitaries, and domestic political party officials.²⁴ After reading the accord aloud, Barzani and Talabani signed it amid much applause.

In his speech, Talabani, interim Iraqi president, said that this agreement protects Kurdistan, which had become a solid ground for promoting democracy, national unity, and consensus. He added that the Kurdish leadership should be proud of its record for being problem solvers and for not being part of the conflict in Iraq.²⁵ He also said the agreement reflects the leadership's response to the legitimate Kurdish people's desires and aspirations and their call for achieving unity, rule of law, legitimacy, and placing Kurdish people's priority over those of individuals in Kurdistan. Talabani claimed that the agreement reflected the maturity of the Kurdish leadership and their sense of responsibility and national duty to place people's interests over narrow party interests. He added that the agreement served the interests of Iraq and would act as a path toward democracy, national unity, and consensus.

On his part, the KRG president Barzani said that the reunification of Kurdistan would enable the Kurds to bring back disputed Kurdish areas to the fold and allow his administration to build healthy institutions and promote transparency, justice, respect for individual rights, and help to avoid violence and disorder. Barzani warned the next Iraq government, which was still in the making following the December 2005 elections, against authoritarianism and corruption and called for transparency and avoiding mixing official and personal commercial work.²⁶

The accord signed between the two parties called for the creation of two new posts, vice president and a deputy to the prime minister, both of which were apportioned to the PUK. Nechirvan Barzani, a KDP leader, was asked to form a unified cabinet, almost evenly distributed between the two parties. Although the agreement stipulated allotting cabinet posts to minority parties, it failed to give the particulars of such posts.²⁷ Dilman

Ahmedi, Kurdistan Communist Party (KCP) representative, was critical of the PUK and KDP leaderships, accusing them of solidifying their own positions and apportioning few minor posts to other members of the Kurdistan Alliance (KA).

Mohammed Rashid Mawati, leader of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), said, "Look at the distribution of ministerial posts—as if they were divided only between the two [dominant Kurdish] parties. It is nothing more than the 50–50 sharing in the previous [unified Kurdish government until 1994]. It is even less [worthy] now."²⁸ Pundits thought that unless the KDP and the PUK carefully observed democratic principles, the leadership roles of the KDP and the PUK would decline in favor of the KIU, which was condemning the rapidly spreading corruption and nepotism. Observers accused both parties of caring more for their immediate relations than for ordinary Kurds who had voted for them.

Kusrat Rasul Ali and Arslan Bayiz, both PUK members, filled the posts of vice president and deputy prime minister, respectively. The accord did lead to the reunification of the ministries of interior, finance, *peshmarga*, and justice. In addition to nominating Jalal Talabani for a full-term presidency in the national government and dividing the KRG's share of cabinet positions equitably between the two parties, the agreement addressed the allocation of the government budget, institutionalization of security agencies, KRG representations abroad, and monitoring and addressing emerging PUK-KDP problems. The accord, defined executive powers and limited the size of the cabinet to 27 ministers, who were required to hold at least a BA degree, was approved by January 25, 2006.²⁹

On January 22, 2006, Ambassador Khalilzad praised Barzani and Talabani for their tireless efforts to reunify the two Kurdistan administrations, which he said would contribute to the stability and prosperity of the Kurdish region.³⁰ He argued that the merger of the talents and expertise of the Arbil and Sulaimaniya administrations would enable the regional government to better serve the needs of the people in the region. He claimed the reconciliation spirit demonstrated by the Kurdish leaders should serve as an example for settling problems in other parts of Iraq.

The UN envoy in Iraq, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, congratulated the country's president Talabani and the KRG president for signing "an agreement paving the way for a single administration in the Kurdish Region."³¹ He said, "It is the hope of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) that institution building in the region and other areas of Iraq will lay the foundations for long-term stability and prosperity of its citizens."³² The speaker of the Iraqi parliament, Hajim al-Hassani, sent letters of congratulations to Talabani and Barzani on the occasion of signing the reunification agreement between their two administrations. Al-Hassani

wished the people of the Kurdistan Region continued progress and prosperity.³³

Despite signing the Reunification Accord, it was painstakingly complicated to implement it because the KDP and the PUK political leaders had their own separate political agenda to pursue. The implementation of the accord remained illusive for the simple reason that the KDP and the PUK remained distrustful of each other. It later became clear that the PUK was waiting for confirmation of Talabani, PUK leader, as Iraqi president.³⁴

Fadhil Mirani, the KDP politburo chief, told reporters that tying the formation of the regional government of Kurdistan to that in Baghdad was unhelpful. The PUK failed to meet the April 14, 2006, deadline to submit the names of its candidates for forming the new regional government as the two parties had agreed.³⁵ Had Talabani's candidature for president of Iraq not been confirmed, he would have sought one of the two top KRG positions, prime minister or president. This could have meant continuation of the two Kurdish administrations, one in Sulaimaniya and another in Arbil. This would have become a big setback for the Kurds as it would have been easier for the Shiite and Sunni Arab blocs to manipulate the Kurds and erode their gains.

Upon arrival at Baghdad airport on January 27, 2006, as the head of a Kurdish delegation to take part in discussions for forming the next full-term government, President Barzani was warmly received by Kurdish officials, American and British ambassadors, and other dignitaries. Although the acceptance of Talabani as Iraq's president opened the door for forming the regional cabinet in Arbil, mistrust between Kurdistan's political parties continued.

Struggle for Power within PUK

By 2008, the KDP had remained more cohesive and centrally controlled than the PUK, which was facing increasing internal challenges due to ongoing under-the-table deals by politicians with investors and construction and oil companies. The disenfranchised insiders and activists spread the news of the ongoing party practices by the use of new electronic means. In view of its lax political structure, the PUK was more vulnerable than the KDP to fragmentation, especially in the presence of its dissatisfied members, who sought greater political and economic power within the party.

Nawshirwan Mustafa, the second man in charge of the PUK after President Talabani, split from his party taking with him a large number of like-minded associates, and established his own party Gorran (Change).

Although Mustafa was ideologically close to Talabani, he disapproved of his close alliance with the KRG president Barzani, whom he accused of enriching himself from Kurdistan's flourishing economy. As much as Mustafa disliked his former boss, he disliked Barzani more for historical and ideological reasons. Barzani and Talabani had divided power between themselves and close associates in Arbil and Baghdad and disenfranchised Mustafa.

The competition between Gorran and PUK for power in the Sulaimaniya province was fierce in advance of the July 25, 2009, provincial elections.³⁶ Mustafa challenged not only Talabani, but also Barzani, by describing them as outmoded tribal leaders. The emergence of the Change Party revitalized the political debate in the Kurdistan Region regarding the need for greater democracy and better governance. Mustafa called for a more transparent and competent government, which would provide better security, social services, and employment opportunities to the growing pool of unemployed youth. The growing income disparity between the rich and poor, resulting from the rapid economic transformation and unscrupulous business practices by senior government officials, alienated the lower and middle class from a government controlled by KDP and PUK party cadres.

The simmering disputes between the PUK and Gorran led to armed confrontations between the two parties in advance of the March 7, 2010, elections. According to WikiLeaks, the US Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) had warned that "unless definitive action is taken quickly and decisions are communicated to all levels, the risk still exists that excitable party loyalists may continue to engage in violence."³⁷

The exchange of harsh words and recrimination between politicians in advance of the elections led to clashes between the PUK and Gorran *peshmarga* in Sulaimaniya. The KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, and deputy Iraqi prime minister, Barham Salih, traveled to Sulaimaniya to control the situation and ensure voters that they would be protected during the upcoming elections. Salih told reporters that some unnatural events had taken place in the city during the past few days, which he said were not in line with the democratic spirit. He also said that although differences in viewpoints were natural, people should avoid settling personal scores through violence.³⁸

Mustafa told reporters that the clashes were triggered by the PUK's dismissing or relocating large numbers of *peshmarga* and the Ministry of Education staff because they supported Gorran.³⁹ He alleged further that his party had differences with the KDP and the PUK on many issues, including the style of management and party interference in the affairs of the KRG, universities, mosques, and markets.⁴⁰ He demanded that the

political parties keep out of governmental and public affairs. He claimed that there were “rampant administrative, financial, and political corruption,” and criticized the lack of transparency in budget allocation in Kurdistan Region, and called for an end to such practices.⁴¹ He called for transparency in exporting oil and handling oil revenues, which he said belonged to the public and not to political parties. When asked if he would join the KA at the end of the elections, Mustafa said that his movement would make such a decision before crossing the bridge.

A number of smaller political parties boycotted the Kurdistan Supreme Political Council (KSPC) meeting of February 9, 2010, accusing President Barzani of monopolizing power by making unilateral decisions on major issues related to Kurdistan's future. Salahadin Baha'adin, secretary general of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), told reporters that his party “will not participate in KSPC meetings because unilateral decisions were being made and that the council should not be led only by one certain individual [Barzani].”⁴² While Berevan Amedi, member of the Kurdish Communist Party, claimed that council's decisions were not binding, Qadir Aziz, leader of the Toilers Party, said, “We have outspokenly talked to the KRG president [Barzani] and stated that the order and authorities of the council be redressed.”⁴³ Abdulsattar Majeed, spokesman for the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), noted that the function of the council and the duties of its members should be clearly defined in order to avoid misunderstanding between its members.⁴⁴ Although the ongoing political discord and debate was part of the democratic process, which was still in its infancy, disputes within and between Kurdistan's political parties in Arbil weakened the KA's position vis-à-vis the central government regarding pending Kurdish demands.

On February 25, 2010, Gorran lawmakers walked out of the KRP in protest against speaker Kamal Kirkuki, for giving them only five minutes to speak about budget allocations for 2010.⁴⁵ While the speaker wanted to initiate voting on the budget bill, Gorran lawmakers interrupted him by first banging their desks and then leaving the hall.⁴⁶

After the KRG security (*peshmarga*) shot and wounded three Gorran lawmakers during a political rally, Adnan Osman angrily told reporters that his colleagues were shot by KDP militia (*peshmarga*). In response, President Barzani told reporters, “Those who today have the guts to denigrate the name of the *peshmarga* will tomorrow also do this with names of martyrs.”⁴⁷ The emergence of Gorran brought to the surface the grievances of smaller political parties..

While delivering a speech at the graduation of a new batch of security forces in Arbil, Barzani praised the role of *peshmarga* in maintaining peace and stability in the Kurdish region and threatened to cut off the hands of

anyone trying to undermine Kurdish people's interests.⁴⁸ He claimed that the KDP and the PUK were trying to unify the ranks of their *peshmarga* and turn them into a cohesive force to protect the region.

Gorran's nationalistic and provocative campaign songs on TV and in public gatherings in advance of the March 7, 2010, elections created considerable anxiety among the Kurds who feared interparty violence. Reporters Namo Abdulla and Sam Dagher wrote, "There is a certain revolutionary zeal to some [songs] that's hard to ignore. Perhaps it is a throwback to the past of the movement's founder Nawshirwan Mustafa."⁴⁹ Before joining the PUK in 1975, Mustafa headed a Maoist movement. One of Gorran's songs used phrases such as rebirth and success, stand up and do not remain powerless, enemies' hands have always been dark and destructive, which were reminiscent of the old-era revolutionary songs.⁵⁰ The Gorran Party members harnessed the anger of Kurdish youth over corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and lack of transparency against their opponents.

The Los Angeles Times reported on March 6, 2010, "When Mustafa quit the PUK in 2006 over what his people say was the party's failure to combat corruption, Talabani gave him \$10 million from funds he controlled to start a media company and think tank, and leased him property in Sulaimaniya."⁵¹ Pundits opined that Mustafa cleverly used the money to build his sophisticated media empire, Hosha, which he used in the July 2009 provincial elections and then during the March 7, 2010, nationwide election to undermine Talabani. While lamenting Gorran's members, Talabani said, "We gave them all these things. They started to . . . say anything against us, and not one of them was hated or arrested."⁵² Many observers feared that the war of words between Mustafa, Talabani, and Barzani might turn into armed confrontation and bloodshed similar to that between Barzani and Talabani during 1994–1998.

The election fever showed that Gorran's appeal was spreading beyond the Kurdish provinces of Sulaimaniya, Arbil, and Duhok into disputed areas in the neighboring provinces of Nineveh, Salahadin, Kirkuk, and Diyala.⁵³ The KDP, with its yellow flag, the PUK, with its green flag, and Gorran, with its blue flag, competed against each other in the disputed city of Kirkuk.

Hassan Hamid Rahim, member of Gorran and former *peshmarga* commander, who was known as Mam Rahim (Uncle Rahim), told reporters that his *peshmarga* charged into Kirkuk "with American troops in 2003 to claim it for the Kurds before he was ordered to leave."⁵⁴ Rahim compared Talabani to Saddam Hussein and described him as a dictator. In a clear reference to the Gorran Movement, Talabani told a large crowd of his supporters in Sulaimaniya, "The enemies of Kurds and the union who dream of destroying the union will be entombed along with their dreams."⁵⁵

Gorran supporters' oratory during the election campaign angered Massoud Barzani, who said, "They have crossed the reddest lines . . . they would be taught a lesson . . . and kicked out of the region."⁵⁶ Gorran was more of a threat to Talabani's PUK in Sulaimaniya than to the KDP, which had a strong base in Arbil and Duhok. Some pundits claimed that Gorran had changed the balance of power in the Kurdistan Region and weakened KRG's bargaining power in Baghdad regarding the disputed Kurdish areas and control of regional resources. Gorran changed the internal and external perception of the Kurdish region into a model for democracy.

An interview with Omer Said Ali, former member of the PUK Politburo, provided reasons why some party members were dissatisfied with their party leadership.⁵⁷ Ali claimed that the PUK suffered from numerous problems, including unwillingness of top party leaders to share power, poor decision-making, mismanagement and poor administration of party affairs as well as the party's undemocratic practices, lack of transparency in the allocation of revenues and failure to achieve social justice. He also claimed party committees had made several reform proposals on November 19, 2008, to deal with party problems but the politburo trashed them.

Ali alleged that instead of heeding their recommendations, Talabani issued a communiqué, without consulting the politburo, stating that anyone sympathizing with Gorran should be expelled from the party. The leadership announced in *Hawlati* that the PUK members should make up their mind to either stay with the PUK or join Nawshirwan Mustafa. The communiqué stated that the politburo had already decided to expel Mustafa from the party. Ali claimed that the communiqué was to close the door in the face of reforms and that "almost all trade unions and social classes are frustrated at the way the party and government have been operating in our region. Many people are not satisfied with the current economic, political and judicial system of Kurdistan. Thus people seek change."⁵⁸

With its 17 seats in the Iraqi parliament, Sulaimaniya was important not only for the image of the PUK within the KA but also in the Iraqi parliament and the new government. PUK members, including Talabani and Salih, had enjoyed key government positions in al-Maliki's cabinet following the December 2005 elections and tried to retain their influence in Baghdad following the March 7, 2010, elections.

In an interview with the *Awenar*, the leaders of Gorran, the KIG, and the KIU alleged there had been vote rigging in the Kurdistan Region during the March 7, 2010 elections.⁵⁹ Zana Rostai of the KIG accused the KA of intervening in the election by bringing underaged people to vote. He claimed his party submitted 20 complaints to the election commission to no avail. *Awenar* cited Shorish Haji, Gorran representative, stating there had been widespread fraud in Arbil and Koy Sinjag districts by the PUK, which had

used some 6, 200 fraudulent forms and identification cards.⁶⁰ He claimed that they had used dead individuals' identification cards to vote.

Performance of Gorran in July 2009 Elections

The July 2009 provincial elections in the Kurdistan Region showed the important role played by the newly emerging Gorran Party in competing with the KDP and the PUK on an even keel. Gorran took away a large number of disaffected voters from the KDP and the PUK and won 25 of the 111-seat KRP.⁶¹ Pundits raised the question of whether Gorran was up to the task of political and social reform in the Kurdistan Region or if it would eventually turn into another traditional political party. Some observers thought that Gorran's presence in the regional parliament would change the overall political atmosphere for better in the region.

Mustafa's split from the PUK weakened not only the old party but shed doubt on the credibility of the leadership of Talabani, who ordered the expelling of Gorran followers from Sulaimaniya University on October 13, 2009. A member of the students' union at the university, who wished to remain anonymous, was cited telling reporters, "This action is part of a PUK cleansing" and that the leadership of his organization had been "instructed to sack the supporters of Gorran in the union."⁶² The Gorran leadership condemned the PUK's action and said we will "not keep silent anymore" and shall make all-out efforts to expose the fault lines of the unruly practices of the PUK and the KDP.⁶³

Despite accusations of violating human rights and the freedom of expression, KRG officials argued that their region was more secure and safer than the rest of Iraq, where assassinations and terrorist attacks had become daily occurrences since 2003. KRG officials were extremely sensitive to criticisms of their daily practices and did not tolerate occasional innocent remarks by journalists impinging on their family honor.

While Gorran's eight representatives, who won seats in the nationwide March elections, initially joined the KA's team, consisting of the PUK, the KDP, the KIU, and the KIG, to negotiate for seats in Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's cabinet, they suddenly split from the team on October 30. The split undermined the KA's position in the eyes of Arab political factions, who resisted yielding to Kurdish demands on the future status of Kirkuk and *peshmarga*, sharing oil revenues, and most of all tarnished the Kurdish image as an impenetrable unified bloc.⁶⁴

Mohammed Tofiq Rahim, a spokesman for Gorran, claimed that the split was caused by "the failure of the KDP and the PUK for not honoring

earlier promises to bring about political reforms and equitable power-sharing.”⁶⁵ While the KDP and the PUK dismissed the significance of Gorran’s split from the alliance, others argued that it would weaken their bargaining position in Baghdad. Rahim said his party would not support Talabani’s reelection as president, would negotiate directly with Arab political factions for cabinet seats in the central government, and that they would oppose the creation of an independent election commission in the Kurdistan Region, claiming that would enable the PUK and the KDP to manipulate election results.⁶⁶

Although the KIU and the KIG did not fully agree with the KDP and the PUK, they remained in the coalition, believing that strength lay in unity. Najib Mohammed, member of the KIU, with four seats, noted, “We have a greater cause to fight for in Baghdad. For us the unity of Kurds is a strong point for Kurds in Baghdad.”⁶⁷ Mohammed claimed that while Gorran’s split might harm the image of the Kurds in Baghdad, it would not change the overall political reality on the ground. Zana Rustai said members of the KA had agreed to negotiate collectively and those taking a unilateral action would bear the responsibility for their action toward Kurdish people.

The withdrawal of Gorran’s 8 lawmakers from the original 57 seats of the KA weakened the bargaining power of both sides in Baghdad. Shorish Haji, a Gorran Party leader, told reporters on November 16, 2010, that his party would like to meet separately with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in order to secure a cabinet seat, preferably deputy prime minister, in the new government.⁶⁸ The KA’s negotiating team leader told reporters that Gorran would be treated just like any other party in the alliance in terms of entitlements to cabinet post. He also noted the apportionment of cabinet seats to Gorran by al-Maliki would not change KA’s entitlements.⁶⁹ The *Awena* newspaper reported on November 30, 2010, that Barzani had objected to any cabinet position for Gorran, which had sought the Ministry of Information.

One of the two deputy prime ministers’ posts was given to Salih al-Mutlaq, senior member of the Iraqiya List (IL), and the other to Roj Nouri Shawais, KDP member. Iraqi political factions were under Ankara’s pressure to create either a third deputy prime minister post or a third deputy presidential post for a Turkman. Gorran accused the KA of “monopolizing decision-making process, sidelining the opposition and favoring duplicity.”⁷⁰ Pundits alleged that Gorran leaders had lost sight of Kurdish national interests and were engaged in personal vendetta against Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani, who had already established themselves as kingmakers in the political arena inside and outside Iraq.

Gorran acted as a thorn on the side of the KDP and the PUK, by provoking them at every opportunity. In an attempt to weaken the KA, Gorran

tried to persuade the KIU and the KIG to break away from the united KA in the Iraqi parliament on the ground that the ruling parties were corrupt, authoritarian, antireform, and restricted individual freedoms.⁷¹

Gorran, with its Leninist-socialist orientation, made extraneous efforts to attract the two Islamic parties to its side and against the two traditional Kurdish nationalist parties, the KDP and the PUK. Unwittingly, Gorran did not trust their fellow Kurds, whom they projected as adversaries, and thought they would get a better deal by negotiating directly with al-Maliki. Some Kurds hoped that this rupture would be temporary since the Kurds had only a few, if any, non-Kurd friends inside and outside Iraq. Their strength had come from their unity and common goals.

Although President Barzani invited all of the newly elected Kurdish lawmakers in the Iraqi parliament to a meeting on November 27, 2010, Gorran lawmakers declined the invitation, claiming that their presence at the meeting would not have made any difference. The purpose of the meeting was to encourage close cooperation between KA's lawmakers and their negotiating team, who tried to forge alliances with non-Kurd political parties on the basis of their 19-point demands.⁷² Pundits wondered where Gorran's interests lay and whether they were working for or against Kurdish national interests. In the absence of a common ground, the gap between Gorran and the KA became larger day after day.⁷³

While the KDP had invited Kurdish and Arab political leaders as well as members of foreign military and diplomatic corps in Iraq to its 13th Congress, the organizers had omitted Gorran from the list of invitees. Mohammed Tofiq, a leading member of Gorran movement, told reporters, "The KDP did not invite us, that is why we did not go [to the gathering]. It is not in our hand. It's the [KDP] political bureau that has the authority to decide who is invited."⁷⁴ Another Gorran leader, Othman Banimarani, said, "We have learnt a lesson about the KDP. It can't really coexist with an opposition. That is why they did not want opposition attending their conference."⁷⁵

Wladimir van Wilgenburg wrote an article for *Rudaw.com*, stating that Major General Toni Cucolo, commander of US Division-North and Task Force Mame, "warned Rifat Abdullah, leader of the *peshmarga* forces, to stop using the *peshmarga*, Kurdistan's regional guards, as a party militia," to intimidate "members of the Kurdish army and security forces who are supporters of the opposition party, Gorran."⁷⁶ The document dated back to February 2010, when Kurdish political parties competed for votes in Kirkuk ahead of the March elections. The leaked report indicated that Cucolo had feared that Kurd-on-Kurd fighting might unravel Kirkuk's stability.

Jalal Jawhar, a Gorran leader, had told US officials that their members were coming under heavy KDP and PUK intimidation and he feared that

Gorran supporters might respond.⁷⁷ Cucolo claimed, “the PUK’s win-at-all-costs attitude was damaging the PUK’s reputation, and in turn, damaging the interests of Kurdistan Regional Government.”⁷⁸ The article added that Cucolo was angry and threatened an end to US support to Kurdish *peshmarga* if they found evidence that they had been involved in interparty political feuds.

Since it was unable to get more than one cabinet post (state minister), Gorran stopped negotiating with al-Maliki’s team on December 21, 2010. Sardar Abdullah told reporters that while his bloc had demanded two service cabinet posts and a deputy prime minister post, they were offered only one minor cabinet post, which they declined to accept.⁷⁹ Had Gorran remained within the Kurdistan fold, it was likely they would have secured at least one, if not more, cabinet positions. The strength of the Kurds in Baghdad lay in the close ties between the KDP and the PUK, which created the backbone of the KA.

Nechirvan Barzani Reemerges with Vigor

Following his replacement with Barham Salih as prime minister in 2009, Nechirvan Barzani, former KRG prime minister, reemerged with vigor in early 2010 as a deputy chair of the KDP. He suggested the need for changes in the KDP by bringing new blood and new ideas into the party in order to meet emerging challenges. In a second interview with *Rozhnamar*, owned by Gorran, Barzani noted, “Reforms for any party are a must, and the KDP has to review itself according to the circumstances it faces.”⁸⁰ He argued further that it was not as important to replace individuals as updating programs and agendas periodically based on self-evaluation and assessment. Barzani cited examples of mistakes made during the March elections, when the KDP candidates who had aligned themselves with the PUK performed poorly in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk. He noted that KDP candidates in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk performed poorly as did PUK candidates in Erbil and Duhok. He claimed that the inability of KDP candidates in these areas to perform well was due to displeasure of some people with the KDP and the PUK performances, leading to the emergence of Gorran, which had better organizational arrangements.⁸¹ Barzani told a *Rudaw* reporter that the KDP will continue working with the weakened PUK “on the basis of their strategic agreement and partnership.”⁸²

PUK officials felt threatened by their coalition partners’ actions following their weakened showing during the March elections. The KRG prime minister Salih sought an explanation from the former KRG prime

minister Nechirvan Bazani for taking members of his cabinet, Ashti Hawrami, minister of natural resources, and Falah Mustafa, on an official visit to Ankara without consulting him. Nechirvan Barzani, who had held meetings with Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, denied Hawrami being part of his delegation, claiming that his mission to Ankara was arranged by President Barzani's office.⁸³ He added that Hawrami was already in Turkey and did not attend his meetings with Turkey's officials.⁸⁴

Following about a year's absence from the political scene, Nechirvan Barzani was suddenly everywhere. It was he, not his replacement, Salih, who was present at the burial ceremony of the remains of about 104 Kurdish children, victims of the 1988 Anfal campaign. Barzani was critical of Arab and Islamic leaders for failing to condemn Saddam Hussein's crimes against the Kurds.⁸⁵ He condemned former government officials for murdering so many innocent children, who happened to be Kurds. Barzani welcomed the Iraqi Criminal Court's decision to describe the Anfal military campaign against the Kurds and the chemical attacks in Halabja as crimes against humanity.⁸⁶ He called on the KA to remind Arab political factions of these crimes while negotiating the components of the next Iraqi cabinet. He said while the European states condemned these crimes, the Arab and the Islamic states maintained silence while Saddam Hussein was slaughtering the Kurds.

Threats to KDP-PUK Strategic Agreement

In an effort to stop the deteriorating relationship between them, the KDP and the PUK recommitted on June 1, 2010, to the strategic alliance they had signed in 2006 for joint work at regional and national levels, including the unification of the regional ministries of *peshmarga*, finance, interior, and security agencies.⁸⁷ While attending the opening session of the Third Conference of the PUK, in Sulaimaniya, President Barzani described "the strategic agreement between his party and the PUK is a necessity for the present and future phases of developments in Kurdistan," despite some of its weaknesses. He apologized to the people of Kurdistan for the 1994–1998 civil strife between his party and the PUK.⁸⁸ He added, "It was wrong, will not be repeated and therefore, we apologize to the people of Kurdistan."⁸⁹ While welcoming critiques, he said, "let there be opposition, but opposition in a democratic framework and criticism must not breach culture and traditions, because the status quo is the result of a decision taken by people; it was not imposed [on them] by force."⁹⁰ A large number of Kurdish

and Iraqi party leaders, as well as foreign dignitaries, were present at the conference.⁹¹

Barzani's speech was to assure the people of Sulaimaniya, where his party did poorly, that the government in Arbil was also their government and that the Kurds were one family regardless of political differences. KDP officials started soul-searching following their poor performance in Sulaimaniya and tried to find ways to improve their image in the province. Brusk Shawais, head of the KDP branch in Sulaimaniya, told reporters, "[T]he political bureau has studied the reasons behind the deficiency of [KDP] voters in Sulaymaniya [during March 7, 2010, election]."⁹²

Sulaimaniya turned into a battleground between the Gorran Party and the PUK on the one hand and the KDP and the PUK on the other during the March elections. The KDP magazine *Gulan* was critical of Prime Minister Barham Salih, PUK deputy leader, for paying too much attention to Sulaimaniya while ignoring Arbil and Duhok. Shawais noted since "We now know what our weak points are . . . KDP will bring special people to serve in Sulaimaniya."⁹³ While KDP dominated the provinces of Arbil and Duhok, the PUK had almost total control in Sulaimaniya until the emergence of Gorran.

The PUK members were critical of the KDP cochair and former KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani for not trying to improve ties between the two parties.⁹⁴ Barzani rejected the accusations and claimed that he was instrumental in bringing the two sides closer together during his tenure. Deterioration of relationships between the KDP and the PUK came to the fore while the reconstruction of the Kurdistan Region was in high gear, the economy was rapidly expanding, and the foreign recognition of the KRG was growing.

Disagreements within the KA delayed the dispatch of their team to Baghdad in order to negotiate their terms for an alliance with either the IL, led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi, or the State of Law (SL) led by the incumbent prime minister al-Maliki.⁹⁵ Despite the show of unity, the stand of the Kurdish delegation was not clear even before leaving for Baghdad. Gorran's continued opposition to President Talabani's candidature for a second term opened the door to Arab candidates to compete for the post. However, through concerted mediation efforts, Gorran's opposition to Talabani gradually waned. Awat Sheikh Janab, a leading member of Gorran, said, "I am optimistic about the steps taken, though they are still nothing but a beginning. Kurdistan's political situation needs such agreements and closeness."⁹⁶

Janab said that Mustafa had hosted a meeting with two prominent members of the PUK at his house on August 8, 2010, in an effort to redress their differences. Without further elaboration, Janab noted, "We have yet

to be answered by the PUK.”⁹⁷ Sa’adi Ahmed Pire, a leading PUK member, told reporters that Talabani would be willing to meet with his old ally Mustafa if he so desired. However, Mohammed Tofiq, Gorran spokesman, argued that reconciliation with the PUK would not stop them from talking about alleged corruptions in the party.

Nepotism in the PUK

While some observers were critical of President Barzani for installing family members, close relatives, and friends in sensitive government positions, others found President Talabani to be as guilty as his partner. During the PUK’s Third Conference, Talabani replaced a number of PUK politburo members with his close relatives and allies in order to retain a tight grip on the party. Qubad Talabani, son; Shanaz Ibrahim Ahmed, sister-in-law; and Fuad Massoum were among the candidates nominated for the PUK’s Central Committee.⁹⁸ Talabani’s wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, and Shalaw Kusrat Rasul, son of Kusrat Rasul, were among those who sought senior party positions. Members running for leadership position had the “option to vote for three-four candidates,” creating an arrangement that would facilitate making “deals between members to vote for one another in order for them to secure and succeed for leadership.”⁹⁹

The KRG president Barzani telephoned Talabani on June 14, 2010, from abroad while on an official visit in France, to congratulate him for being reelected as secretary general of the PUK and wished him continued success.¹⁰⁰ Kusrat Rasul and Barham Salih were elected as Talabani’s deputies.¹⁰¹ In his acceptance speech, Talabani promised to strengthen ties with the KDP and other Iraqi political parties.

On June 30, 2010, about two weeks after the PUK’s Congress, the *Kurd.net* reported from Sulaimaniya, the heartland of the PUK, that some members of the party were objecting to the outcome of the Congress. Citing *Hawlati*, the *Kurd.net* reported that members of the PUK party intelligentsia groups (Burhan Sa’id Sofi and Barzan Ahmed groups) rejected the outcome of the congress, which they claimed was adversely affected by the party security apparatus and President Talabani’s wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed.¹⁰² Members of the two groups demanded that the PUK void the outcome of the congress. Burhan Sa’id Sofi stated that they were concerned about the ongoing PUK practices and the growing control of Hero Ibrahim Ahmed over the Congress and “PUK officials (had) handed out a list of candidates” and encouraged members to vote only for those on the list.¹⁰³

Gorran Calls for New Elections

In the wake of large-scale antigovernment demonstrations (Arab Spring) in Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen, which led to the downfall of the governments in Tunisia and Egypt, the PUK and KDP leaders met in Salahadin, Arbil, on January 27, 2011, presided over by Barzani and Talabani, reiterating commitment to the strategic agreement they had signed.¹⁰⁴ The grim look on the faces of the two leaders sitting side by side before their meeting was indicative that they were sensing trouble in the air, especially when they called for improving the living conditions in the region. The KDP's secretary general Fadhil Mirani told *Aswat al-Iraq* that the meeting "had discussed prerequisites of the current phase and circumstances passing on Kurdistan Region, and the whole region."¹⁰⁵ He also said while confirming their [the KDP's] commitment to the strategic agreement with the PUK and bilateral relations, they discussed ways to improve citizens' living conditions "at a time when evil elements hope to create a loophole in their relations, whilst our friends are expressing anxiety towards them."¹⁰⁶ This was a clear warning that some unpleasant surprise was in the making.

It was following the aforementioned meeting that Gorran openly dropped the bombshell when it called for the dissolution of Kurdistan's regional government and parliament and holding new elections.¹⁰⁷ Tofiq alleged that the present regional administration did not represent the people, was corrupt and incapable of meeting people's basic needs. He added, "Waves of protest are resonating across the world," and "[i]f the KDP and PUK don't reform, that could happen here as well."¹⁰⁸ Gorran called for dissolution of the regional government, holding new elections, separating the security and *peshmarga* forces (*Parastin*, *Zanyari*, *peshmarga*) from politics, returning illegally acquired wealth by parties and individuals to the people and referring the new regional constitution to a new parliament.¹⁰⁹ Gorran had also called for mass demonstrations on January 31, 2011, against the regional government.

President Barzani was quick to call for another meeting in Salahadin, Arbil, on January 30, 2011, in order to respond to Gorran's call for demonstrations against the KRG. Barzani presided over the meeting, attended by members of the council of ministers, members of the parliament and leaders of all political parties in Kurdistan to "discuss the extraordinary call by the region's opposition group (Gorran) for the abolition [dissolution] of the Kurdistan Regional Government and parliament."¹¹⁰ The meeting issued a statement denouncing Gorran's call for the dissolution of the regional government and called for the people of Kurdistan to be vigilant of any action

that might jeopardize Kurdistan's security and stability. The statement also said, "Any attempt for reform or change in the Kurdistan Region must be undertaken within the framework of law and regulations and must also respect the results of elections and the will of the people of the region. We reject any attempts that would jeopardize the security, stability and peaceful coexistence in the Kurdistan Region."¹¹¹ While affirming its belief in democratic values, differences in opinion, and peaceful and legal opposition, the KRG acknowledged its shortcomings, including corruptions, and the need for reforms. The meeting also called for cooperation between the government, opposition and civil society organizations in order to peacefully address the problems facing the region. In addition to KDP and PUK representatives, the meeting was attended by representatives of the KIG, KIU, as well as Turkman, Christian, and other minority groups.¹¹²

Salih told reporters that he was surprised by Gorran's demands, which he said were irrational and illegal, and said that such grievances should be aired through regional institutions and not by creating chaos and disturbances.¹¹³ He said while he recognizes the government's shortfalls and needs for better services, Gorran's action was irresponsible and had unforeseen consequences for Kurdistan. The following day, February 1, 2011, Salih addressed a group of businessmen, stressing the importance of security and stability for the safety of their investment.¹¹⁴ While calling on businessmen to participate in the reconstruction of the region and the provision of social services, he turned a blind-eye to the major issues of the day, unemployment, inflation, provision of sanitary drinking water and electricity, and fighting nepotism and corruption, which the opposition was calling for. Despite their differences, Kurdish political factions remained united when it came to the future of the Kurdish community.

Chapter 2

Kurdish Leadership Style and Internal Disputes

Despite differences in their personalities, Talabani, Iraqi president and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), stand almost shoulder to shoulder to defend the Kurdish issue. While Talabani is described as a liberal and Massoud Barzani as a conservative, both stand accused by the Gorran Party leadership of turning the regional government into a family business, empowering and enriching members of their own families, relatives, close associates, and party members and alienating nonpartisan Kurds. The two parties alternated the premiership of the KRG between members of their own families and relatives. While Massoud Barzani had a firm grip on power in the region, through the KDP, Talabani was increasingly losing power to Gorran, which splintered from the PUK in 2006.¹

According to James Calderwood, reporter for the *National United Arab Emirates*, Masroor Barzani, son of President Barzani, had stated that “he eventually wants to hold his father’s position as the elected leader of Iraqi Kurds.”² He added that he had his own ambitions to become the KDP leader and work for his people. He had also said, “I think the Kurds deserve to have their own independent state, like any other nation.”³ Hopefully, Masroor Bazani wants to replace his father through the ballot box and not through inheritance and family tradition like other Middle Eastern rulers who faced large-scale uprisings in 2011, leading to the downfall of Bin Ali in Tunisia, Husni Mubarak in Egypt, and Mu’ammarr Qadhafi in Libya.

Despite differences in the two leaders’ educational backgrounds, upbringing, and mannerisms, both Barzani and Talabani have shown

good quality of leadership for building the fundamentals of a semblance of a modern state. Barzani appeared to be a fast learner and a capable individual for being able to muster the skills required for administering his region and handling its foreign affairs. While projecting himself as a democrat, he continued to exercise a large degree of authoritarianism.

Talabani and Barzani have become more alike over time, as evidenced by their survival instincts and pragmatism during 1991–2011. Yet, suspicion and mistrust between the PUK and the KDP led to the emergence of shadow governments and institutions in the Kurdistan Region. Matt Frazer, *Press TV* reporter, opined, “In KRG, all the institutions of government—whether military, national resources, or education—fall under the direct control of either of the two ruling parties.”⁴ The PUK-controlled Sulaimaniya province has established numerous educational institutions, similar to those in the KDP-controlled provinces of Arbil and Duhok, leading to misallocation of resources.⁵

Instead of duplicating each other, some of these educational institutions with similar programs ought to be combined in order to create centers of excellence in specialized areas, making better use of the limited financial and academic resources to prepare students to deal with real-life problems, conducting rigorous research, and encouraging them to travel from one province to another.⁶ This would help in bringing the Kurds of different regions closer together, harmonizing their relationships, improving public communication, and preventing regionalism. Students from Sulaimaniya should seek curriculum offered by the universities in Arbil and Duhok and vice versa.

Despite many attempts to reunify Kurdistan’s administrations following the 1994–1998 civil war, Sulaimaniya was still controlled by the PUK and Arbil and Duhok by the KDP. The reunification process was slow and painful due to the lack of trust between the KDP and the PUK. Sulaimaniya, the PUK power base, is increasingly coming under the influence of Gorran because of its anticorruption stand.

Interparty Disputes Boil to the Surface

The simmering tension between Nawshirwan Mustafa, Gorran leader, and Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani came to the open on February 17, 2011, shortly after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt against their repressive rulers. Under the pretext of organizing demonstrations in solidarity with Egyptian and Tunisian demonstrators, Mustafa’s followers revolted against the KRG, hoping to bring down the Barzani-Talabani-led government. About 3,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Sulaimaniya

on February 17 to protest against corruption, nepotism, and monopoly of economic and political powers by KRG officials. Instead of marching to the designated demonstration area (Saray/Azadi Square) in the center of Sulaimaniya, the demonstrators headed toward the KDP headquarters—Gorran's archenemy.⁷ The demonstrators chanted slogans demanding work for the unemployed and an end to corruption and started throwing stones at the KDP headquarters. KDP officials claimed that on failing to disperse the demonstrators by warning shots, they were obliged to fire into the crowd, killing one and injuring forty-seven.⁸ The KDP blamed Gorran for inciting violence on the ground as it had asked a week earlier for the dissolution of the KRG and Kurdistan Regional Parliament (KRP). In retaliation, KDP supporters set fire to Gorran's offices in Arbil and Duhok, heightening tension in the Kurdish region.

KDP officials issued a statement on February 18, 2011, alleging that the demonstrators were infiltrated by troublemakers, implying members of Gorran, who had changed the officially approved demonstration route in order to attack KDP headquarters, obliging security guards to fire at the crowd in self-defense.⁹ The statement called on the local government to preserve peace and on the people to protect political and government institutions.

KRG Response to Demonstrators' Demands

Kamal Kirkuki, speaker of the regional parliament, described the demonstrators as troublemakers undermining the political and economic achievements made by the KRG since 1991.¹⁰ While the KRP was holding an extraordinary session on February 23, 2011, to address the causes of the demonstrations, unidentified armed individuals ransacked and set fire to Gorran's party headquarters in Arbil, heightening tension in the region. The ruling parties and government officials made concerted efforts to divert attention from demonstrators' grievances, which included a shortage of jobs, widespread corruption and nepotism, lack of transparency, and rampant inflation.

The KRP formed a committee to submit a set of recommendations that would address the rapidly evolving situation in the region. The committee made a 17-point proposal to calm the heightened tension resulting from the demonstrations and their aftermath in Sulaimaniya¹¹:

1. Condemnation and prohibition of firing on the public, attacking and burning party headquarters, or destroying private and public property.

2. Withdrawal of all security forces from the street, especially in Sulaimaniya.
3. All those arrested during demonstrations were to be released and those who had crimes registered against them were to be tried.
4. The KRG was to compensate all those who had suffered losses resulting from violence during demonstrations.
5. Only civilian and Interior Ministry police forces were to be responsible for the protection of demonstrators..
6. *Peshmarga's* job was to be limited to protecting national interests and they were to be kept out of political party disputes.
7. A member of the Appeal's Court was to lead the committee investigating the February 17, 2011, incident in Sulaimaniya.
8. Members of the police and interior security forces who had failed to carry out their duties were to be tried in the court of law.
9. Police and local security officers were to be prohibited from arresting individuals for merely participating in demonstration.
10. Deploying military units from one city to another was to be prohibited except under threat of external aggression.
11. A court order was to be issued before arresting and trying those responsible for attacking and setting fire to the Nalia Television and Radio stations.
12. Parliamentary committees and members of political blocs were to submit recommendations for administrative, political, and social reforms.
13. It was incumbent upon the KRG to submit to the parliament a set of recommendations concerning social justice, individual freedom, and greater transparency.
14. All political factions were to try to calm the situation in order to preserve the region's security and stability.
15. The parliament was to invite the prime minister, ministers of interior, and *peshmarga* to shed light on the security situation and respond to lawmakers' questions.
16. Creating an environment conducive for dialogue between political parties who have representation in the parliament.
17. Creating a special committee consisting of representatives of political parties in order to study and follow up on demonstrators' demands.

Hiwa Ahmed Mustafa, head of the KDP headquarters in Sulaimaniya, alleged that the Gorran had instigated the incident by diverting protestors from their designated destination of the Saray Square to the KDP headquarters, warned against similar attacks, and blamed the local police for

failing to control the crowd, implying that the local police might have been sympathetic toward demonstrators.¹² This showed deep mistrust between government officials in Sulaimaniya and Arbil.

While on an official visit to Italy during the demonstrations, President Barzani called on the KRG to investigate the incident and apprehend “those responsible for today’s violence”; he called on all sides “to behave calmly and to preserve the peace in Kurdistan.”¹³ Barzani focused on security matters rather than on issues raised by demonstrators, which were rooted in the failure or unwillingness of senior KRG officials to share power and wealth resulting from the flourishing economy in a fair manner with those whom they ruled. KRG officials often bragged about their political and economic achievements, which belonged to the Kurdish people and not to the efforts of a specific party or individual.

As a follow up to the evolving demonstrations in Sulaimaniya, a committee, led by Mohammed Qaradaghi, was formed to investigate the February 17, 2011, incident in Sulaimaniya and several thousand *peshmarga* were dispatched to Sulaimaniya in order to restore law and order to the city.¹⁴ The opposition, led by Gorran, accused the KDP and not the KRG of trying to occupy Sulaimaniya, which was its power base. Despite the fact that both the KDP and the PUK were partners in the KRG, the opposition singled out the KDP for the shortfall of the regional government. In defense of the KDP, Barham Salih, KRG prime minister and deputy leader of the PUK, told reporters that the Ministry of *Peshmarga* and not the KDP had dispatched the *peshmarga* to Sulaimaniya in order to protect people’s lives and maintain stability in the city.¹⁵ One wonders what role Salih played, as prime minister, in deploying the *peshmarga* to Sulaimaniya.

On February 19, 2011, some 50 masked men stormed the sole independent NRT Nalia Television station in the German Village compound, north of Sulaimaniya, destroying all their equipment, setting fire to the building, and injuring one of their guards.¹⁶ The new television station had started broadcasting Sulaimaniya events as they unfolded. Twana Osman, the general manager of the NRT, accused KRG and PUK officials of being the main culprits responsible for the attack.¹⁷ Osman claimed that the attack on NRT was an attack on the media at large and was a clumsy effort to hide truth from the public. Investigation results assigned responsibility for the attack to President Talabani’s brown-shirt security units.¹⁸

Amnesty International called on the KRG “to rein-in militias [*peshmarga*] affiliated to political parties who had killed two protestors [one on February 17 and another on Sunday, February 20, 2011], as anti-government demonstrations continue in the north of Iraq.”¹⁹ Malcolm Smart, the director of Amnesty International, stated bluntly, “These killings add fuel to an already volatile situation in Sulaimaniya and represent a very

worrying as well as tragic development. It is imperative that the authorities step in and prevent further killings and other abuses, and bring the KDP militia under control and accountable under the law.”²⁰

It was a great triumph for Gorran to see Amnesty International apportion major responsibility to the KDP for the violence in Sulaimaniya. The demonstrations continued on February 21, during which another youth was killed and forty-seven injured, bringing the number of casualties to three.²¹ *The Washington Post* reported that people were fed up with the lack of jobs for those not affiliated with the KDP and the PUK.

Despite the presence of thousands of *peshmarga*, demonstrations by ordinary people and university students continued on February 23.²² The people of Sulaimaniya, who felt under siege, demanded the withdrawal of *peshmarga* forces from their city, an end to shortage of food and electricity, and the creation of new jobs for the growing pool of unemployed youth.

On February 21, the KRG cabinet held a meeting, attended by representatives of the KDP, PUK, Gorran, Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), in order to discuss the events in Sulaimaniya.²³ The meeting, which was chaired by Prime Minister Barham Salih and attended by Nechirvan Barzani, deputy chairman of the KDP, failed to calm the situation in the region. Thousands of university students held demonstrations in Sulaimaniya and Darbandi Khan on February 23, calling for the creation of jobs for unemployed youth, abolition of polygamy, and dialogue with the KRP.

Demonstrations Turn Civil

A group of demonstrators calling themselves the patriotic Kurdish scholars announced on February 24 that they would organize peaceful demonstrations for a limited time frame in Arbil during the next few days in an effort to vent their views about the needed administrative, political, and economic reforms.²⁴ The group demanded eradication of corruption, unification of party militia, implementation of Article 140 in disputed areas, filling of the post of vice president, withdrawing *peshmarga* from Sulaimaniya, respecting freedom of expression and woman's rights, creation of jobs, setting a time frame for improving basic services, declaring independence unilaterally, and closing Turkish and Iranian military outposts in Iraqi Kurdistan. The group leader (Baqi Barzani) claimed that after a long wait for permission, the police chief told him that “given the unstable political status quo, we should abstain from holding such a harmful demonstration.”²⁵ He claimed that when his group started arguing that

it was their constitutional rights to hold demonstrations, they “were threatened to immediately leave the facility, or face legal charges for violating law, creating troubles and inciting mayhem.”²⁶ Baqi Barzani said, “It is very regrettable that our so-called democratic government does not respect the rights of its own citizens even to peaceful demonstration, one of the most inherent and elementary right of every citizen in every nation.”²⁷ They complained that the government was not even honoring the 17-point recommendations made by the KRP, which included *peshmarga* withdrawal from the Saray Square (Azadi Square). Representatives of the Gorran and the KIU in the parliamentary investigative committee complained that they were almost beaten by security guards at a hospital in Arbil when they tried to question a man involved in the attack on the Nalia (NRT) television station.²⁸

While denying the petition of an independent civil society group, led by Baqi Barzani, to hold peaceful protests, the same administration allowed and praised KDP supporters who hit the streets of Arbil by the thousands, carrying orange-yellow flags and KDP bandanas, which were described by some Kurds as provocative and divisive at a time when the region needed cool heads to avert disaster.²⁹

The former KRG prime minister and deputy KDP chairman Nechirvan Barzani thanked all segments of Arbil residents for preserving peace and making the February 26 carnival possible. Although Barzani had often been described as an intelligent and wise young person, his remarks were not appreciated by some observers. While Barzani was deputy to Fadhil Mirani, he carried out full KDP responsibilities, leaving his boss behind the curtain.

While commenting on the demonstrations in Sulaimaniya, Kalar, and Chamchamal, President Barzani said he had been monitoring the events of the last few days closely from Europe, which he said had regretfully resulted in a number of casualties³⁰; others exploited the tragic events to advance their own political agenda. He added that others spread the message of peace, peace, and peace, which should be Kurdistan’s message.³¹ He also made it clear that everyone has the right to create parties (implying Nawshirwan Mustafa), organize peaceful demonstrations, and participate in elections but people should avoid using force and harming public interest. He stressed that there was no place in Kurdish society for those who sought violence as Kurds had a long road ahead of them to achieve true democracy, fight corruption, and resolve disputes through dialogue and not force.³²

Although the demonstrations supposedly had turned peaceful, another protestor was killed and four injured on February 26, which was the last day of demonstrations.³³ Further south in the town of Kalar, a stronghold

of the PUK, a group of Kurds gathered in front of the Layla Qasim school and then marched toward the KDP branch number 22, where a person was injured as a result of stone-throwing at the local security.³⁴ The PUK- and Gorran-controlled areas showed considerable animosity against the KDP during the demonstrations.

Gorran, KIU, and KIG Demand Reforms

Gorran, joined by the KIU and KIG, held a joint news conference on March 3, 2011 at the headquarters of *Rozhname* newspaper in Sulaimaniya. They demanded the replacement of the ministers of interior, finance, *peshmarga*, and natural resources by technocrats; the transforming of party *peshmarga* forces into a national security force; the forming of a committee to oversee government functions; improvement of basic services; the dissolving of the regional government and parliament; holding early elections; fighting corruption and nepotism; and ending monopoly over political power and economic activities.³⁵

Upon returning from Europe to Kurdistan on March 1, President Barzani expressed his condolences to the families of the Sulaimaniya demonstration victims and thanked the Kurdish people for preserving peace and stability in the region. He called on the KRP on March 4 to study the possibility of holding early elections in Kurdistan as demonstrators had demanded.³⁶ However, Mohammed Tofiq Rahim, spokesman for Gorran, argued that it was imperative that the present government and parliament be replaced by a technical transitional government in order to ensure that the next election would be clean and transparent.³⁷

In view of the deteriorating security situation in Iraqi Kurdistan, President Talabani traveled to Arbil on March 3 and met with Barzani on March 4 regarding the aftermath of the February 17 demonstrations.³⁸ After meeting with Barzani, Talabani said while both were respectful of demonstrators' demands, the existing government and parliament were legitimately elected by 70 percent of the voters, implying that they had no intention of dissolving the KRG.³⁹

KDP Feel Threatened by Gorran and the PUK

Demonstrations in Sulaimaniya and its outskirts were still in progress on the eve of the Kurdish new year, Newroz, on March 21. While PUK

leaders showed a semblance of solidarity with the KDP, observers opined that the former tacitly approved of Gorran's aggressive assault on the KDP in an effort to consolidate their weakened power base, polish their liberal image, and let the KDP and Gorran slug it out before the next elections.

While demonstrators were getting killed and injured, Salih spent much of his time meeting with lawyers, businessmen, and academics in Sulaimaniya rather than sitting down with protestors' representatives to calm the heightened tension in his home base, Sulaimaniya. At a meeting with a group of lawyers in Sulaimaniya on February 26, Salih said that it was important to change the role of law and legislators in order to enable holding peaceful demonstrations, as if the problem lay in the absence of such laws and not in his government's practices.⁴⁰

Although the PUK and Gorran disagreed over the distribution of power, both were deeply mistrustful of the KDP for ideological and historical reasons, fearing that the latter might disenfranchise them from power. In line with their leftist-socialist ideology, both Nashirvan Mustafa and Jalal Talabani had long shunned Barzanis' leadership of the Kurdish liberation movement, describing them as tribal. Both Talabani and Mustafa had campaigned earlier to liberate farmers and laborers from "landlords, religious leaders, especially Sheikhs, Sayyids and tribal chiefs."⁴¹ Talabani, often described as pragmatic and cunning, tried to wiggle his way out of the conflict by embracing the demonstrators' demands and avoiding criticizing Gorran's aggressive drive against Barzani, with whom he had signed a strategic alliance. While he was a member of the Socialist International, Talabani was a real capitalist, when it came to his own interests.

Despite differences in the style of leadership, Mustafa and his associates were ideologically closer to the PUK than the KDP. The *peshmarga* fighters of Mustafa and Talabani had jointly fought Massoud Barzani's forces during the 1994–1998 Kurdish civil war, when the former had sought Iranian support and the latter Saddam Hussein's. .

While demonstrators shed doubts on Barzani's sincerity to meet their demands, the *Kurd Net* reported on March 18 that Talabani had called the demonstrators' "demands inspirational and legitimate."⁴² As a secretary general of the PUK, Talabani released a statement saying, "We, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, express support for peaceful meetings, demonstrations and sit-in occasions and strongly oppose any violent acts or the use of arms against the demonstrators."⁴³ He added, "We support all your legitimate demands and strive to accelerate their achievement, as well as guaranteeing decent life and freedoms for you demonstrators."⁴⁴ He concluded his remarks in a patronizing manner by stating, "We consider all young people, like yourselves, as our own kids, and visualize your demands from this respect."⁴⁵

One would have expected the KRG and not the PUK or the KDP to release separate statements concerning demonstrators' demands unless the two parties were distrustful of each other. Talabani could have endorsed statements made by the KRG or the KRP instead of issuing statements supporting demonstrators' demands. During its extraordinary session on March 18, the KRP had already incorporated some of the demonstrators' demands in its 17-point recommendations, which were described as positive and calming.⁴⁶ Gorran made concerted efforts to drive a wedge between the KDP and the PUK in order to advance its own cause. Since the KDP and the PUK were partners in the regional government and parliament, they should have openly accepted equal responsibility for the rampant corruption, nepotism, and political and economic exploitations, which Barzani, as KRG president, had already said that he would address.

Although many Kurds agreed with Mustafa's characterization of the KRG leaders, they questioned his real motive for the timing of the demonstrations, fearing that they might jeopardize the political and economic gains made by the KRG during 1991–2012, in the interest of party politics. Many observers thought that it was reckless of Mustafa to call for the dissolution of the KRG and the KRP while the situation in Iraq was still fluid and the Kurds still had a difficult road ahead. Some Kurds feared that Mustafa's personal vendetta against the Barzanis could fragment the Kurdistan Alliance (KA), divide the Kurdish people, squander the economic and political gains made during 1991–2012, and destroy the emerging quasi-state of Kurdistan.

Although Barzani and Talabani claimed to have recognized the KRG's shortfalls and were taking corrective measures to address them, demonstrators in Sulaimaniya trusted neither side and continued holding daily protests. Gorran played devil's advocate by throwing out the baby with the bath water. Mustafa's utopian leftist ideology did not bode well for the evolving democracy in Kurdistan, which many observers acknowledged needed considerable overhaul and not to be overthrown.

While the opposition, including Gorran, called for the escalation of demonstrations,⁴⁷ others praised President Barzani for proposing a roadmap for reconciliation and reforms.⁴⁸ Many Kurds admitted that Gorran had a role to play in building Kurdistan's institutions by helping to improve and not destroy them.⁴⁹ Gorran's intervention to improve transparency, equality, social justice, checks and balances, and separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers were important steps to strengthening democracy, eliminating corruption and nepotism and preventing misuse and abuse of economic and political powers. It was not only Barzani but also Talabani and their associates down the line, including Mustafa, who benefited from Kurdistan's flourishing economy.⁵⁰

Mahdi Haji, member of the KA, called Gorran's description of KRG in the Iraqi parliament as illegitimate, provocative, and self-defeating.⁵¹ Another Kurdish lawmaker, Shuwan Taha, accused Gorran of using all sorts of tactics to tarnish the image of the KRG by calling for the withdrawal of *peshmarga* from Kirkuk.⁵² Taha alleged that by calling for *peshmarga* withdrawal from Kirkuk, Gorran had put itself in the same position as Arab nationalists, Turkmen, and Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki who had wanted to force *peshmarga* units out of disputed areas.⁵³

Hamid Baqi, author and columnist, wrote that certain parties, implying Gorran, were trying to achieve party interests by exploiting demonstrators' demands and colluding with the forces of evil, such as Iranian al-Quds Brigade, Ba'athists, and the Association of Muslim Scholars.⁵⁴ Diehard Ba'athists, Arab nationalists, and former Saddam Hussein loyalists tried to exploit the situation in Kurdistan by issuing a statement in the name of the Liberation Movement of Ta'amim (Kirkuk) province, describing the demonstrations in Sulaimaniya as Nawshirwan Mustafa's revolution.⁵⁵ The statement of the group, which was placed on the National Islamic Front website, associated with the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, led by Izzat al-Duri, former Saddam Hussein deputy, also said that the Ta'amim revolution was part of Kurdistan's revolution, wanting to build a united Iraq, based on brotherhood and love void of sectarianism.⁵⁶ In their statement, the group added that they support Mustafa's revolution because of his devotion to the nation and keeping the beloved north (Kurdistan) as an integral part of Iraq. Despite concerted efforts by the KRG to make "Kurdistan Region" an official title for Iraqi Kurdistan, most Arab political factions such as the Association of Muslim Scholars and Arab nationalists insisted on using the title of "Shimal al-Iraq al-Habib" (the beloved northern Iraq) in an effort to deny the region's Kurdish identity.⁵⁷

Pundits opined that while Barzani and Talabani had played and continued to play the role of peacemakers between Sunni and Shiite Arabs, they have failed to mend their own internal problems peacefully. Mahmoud Othman, lawmaker and member of KA, warned that "the danger will grow if the tensions are not resolved, especially since 40 percent of Kurdistan's territory is under the control of Baghdad, and Turkey and Iran are stabbing us [Kurds] in the back."⁵⁸ He said that Kurdistan needed urgent legislative reforms that would bring government officials into account when they engage in unlawful practices.

Unless the KDP, the PUK, Gorran, and Islamic and other smaller parties were willing to bury their hatchets, respect the rule of law, and discuss and settle their differences in a frank and transparent manner, they would all be condemned for squandering the opportunities created by the war of 2003 for improving living conditions of their people. Othman claimed that "the PUK and Gorran currently enjoyed good relations" and had noted

during a recent meeting between the KDP, the PUK, and Gorran that all the three were willing to meet and resolve their differences.⁵⁹ While criticizing the KDP and the PUK for depriving Gorran of a cabinet position in Prime Minister al-Maliki's government, Othman claimed that Mustafa had failed to follow his advice to congratulate Barzani when elected president, implying that personal feud might be the root cause of the ongoing conflict between Gorran and the KDP.⁶⁰

Othman noted that the KDP was worried about the future of its strategic agreement with the PUK and blamed the PUK for not making any effort to protect the KDP from protestors in Sulaimaniya, the PUK's political and military (*peshmarga*) power base. The KDP and the PUK strategic agreement called for a joint ticket during elections and dividing the accumulative gains of seats in Kurdistan and Baghdad equally. The failure of the KDP and the PUK to help Gorran win a major cabinet seat (Ministry of Trade) in Baghdad aggravated the relationship between the three parties, leading to Gorran's withdrawal from the KA.

Political Leaders Recalibrate Their Relationships

Realizing that they might squander the opportunity created by the 2003 Iraq War, Kurdish political parties finally decided to create a "peace committee" consisting of representatives of nine political parties and groupings, in order to reconcile Kurdish political parties. *Ajans a Peyamner* reported that the committee had met on March 19, 2011, and signed a document that would prohibit the use of force and intervention by external powers to settle Kurdish internal problems.⁶¹ The spokesperson for the committee, Hawri Dilshad, told reporters that the signatories of the document included PUK, KDP, KIU, Gorran, KIG, the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP), Kurdistan Toilers Party (KT), Kurdistan Communist Party (KCP), and Islamic Movement (IM) in Iraq.⁶²

In addressing Newroz celebrations, Barzani recognized protestors' demands and called for a broad-based government, cabinet reshuffle, and expediting reforms related to "government procurement, contracts and market monopoly by larger companies."⁶³ He added, "We had a meeting with the KRG Council of Ministers yesterday [March 20] and agreed on a comprehensive reform program in the Kurdistan Region."⁶⁴ Barzani promised to end preferential treatment in filling government positions, making project tendering and awarding transparent, investigate questionable projects awards, prevent market monopoly by large business outfits, and "prohibit subcontracting of government projects."⁶⁵

Kawa Abdullah, head of the Sulaimaniya provincial council, claimed that Barzani had vowed during a meeting with heads of political factions in Sulaimaniya province on March 16 that he would resign from his post if KRG failed to implement his reform plan within four months.⁶⁶ While admitting his government's shortcomings, Barzani opined that people should also give the government due credit for its accomplishments during recent years. Barzani acknowledged that there were shortfalls in the government's performance, but these things should not lead to attacking each other and letting party interests take precedence over people's demands for better services. He noted that the lack of interparty harmony was responsible for losing five parliament seats during the March 2010 elections.⁶⁷ Barzani added that he would like to preserve the KRG's political and economic gains, limit the presidency to two terms, hold early provincial council elections, establish an electoral commission, and call on the Sulaimaniya provincial council to address residents' demands.⁶⁸

One of the major demands of Gorran, which called for the regional parliament and government to resign, was defeated in the parliament. In its March 9 session, the regional parliament questioned Prime Minister Salih and the ministers of interior and *peshmarga* about the ongoing demonstrations and casualties resulting from clashes between demonstrators and security units.⁶⁹ The KRP speaker Kamal Kirkuki asked Salih if his government had taken any action on demonstrators' demands, encapsulated in the 17-point recommendations made by parliament on February 23. The speaker invited parliamentary group leaders to question the prime minister as well as ministers of interior and *peshmarga* about the demonstrations. Out of 111 lawmakers, 45 took part in the discussions. At the end, the speaker presented a proposal made by a number of lawmakers for a no-confidence in the government. The move was defeated by a vote of 67 to 28.⁷⁰ Opposition groups claimed that since the parliament was dominated by the KDP and the PUK, it was impossible to bring down the government.

While delivering a speech, commemorating the 1991 Kurdish uprising on March 12, Barzani said that he wholeheartedly supported demonstrators' legitimate demands and peaceful demonstrations and that since current government came to power through the ballot box, a minority party cannot force a majority government out of office by force.⁷¹ He added that instead of exploiting the demonstrations to advance their party interests, opposition could make proposals for improving government's performance and delivery system.

While Barzani and Salih were making promises of reforms, four more demonstrators were injured in Sulaimaniya on March 22.⁷² While demonstrations in the Azadi Square in Sulaimaniya continued, clashes erupted

between protestors and local police in Halabja, resulting in 15 injured.⁷³ *Kurd.net* reported on April 3 that large numbers of protestors gathered after Friday's prayers in the Azadi Square and clashed with riot police and security forces, leading to about 50 injured.⁷⁴ Since the regional government had not taken any serious action to implement demonstrators' demands, observers wondered what the end game would be.

Mala Bakhtiyar, PUK representative, told reporters that the KDP, the PUK, and the KIG had met on March 3 in order to defuse the conflict and also that PUK officials had earlier met with Gorran officials to discuss the possibility of forming "a unity government including all the above three parties [KDP, PUK, Gorran] . . . to deal with protestors 22 point demands."⁷⁵ While Gorran wanted to lump its own demands with those of the demonstrators, the PUK and the KDP wanted to draw a clear line between the two.⁷⁶ Barzani noted that the ongoing events suggest that they were facing two major issues, one related to opposition demands and the other to protestors' grievances. He alleged that the opposition used protestors' demands as a tool for achieving its political agenda and that they should seek their objectives through the ballot box.⁷⁷

While KRG officials tried to contain the conflict, the media savvy Gorran, supported by the KIU and the KIG, kept the Sulaimaniya demonstrations alive for its fiftieth day.⁷⁸ The protestors' demands mushroomed from 17, which was approved by the KRP, to 22 and then to the dissolution of the KRG and the KRP. In the face of the shifting targets of the demonstrators, galvanized by Gorran and Arab media, the KDP and the PUK leadership met on April 8, and issued a joint response, stating while the initial 17-point demonstrators' demands, approved by the regional parliament, were under consideration, the way the opposition was pursuing to dissolve the government was illegal and unconstitutional.⁷⁹ The KDP and PUK left the door open for negotiation with the opposition.

Barzani Lays Out a Reform Plan

The Sulaimaniya demonstration and its aftermath could have turned into another Kurdish civil war, if not for cool heads and measured handling by the KRG. Under considerable internal and external pressure, President Barzani took matters into his own hands rather than leaving it to the KRG prime minister Salih to handle. This showed that Barzani either did not trust Salih or did not consider him competent enough to deal with the conflict.

In addressing demonstrators' grievances, Barzani wisely picked on the widely publicized issue of misappropriation of public land. It was President

Barzani's chief of staff, Fu'ad Hussein, and not the prime minister's office, that announced on May 10, 2011, that the government had suspended further allocation of public land for agricultural and residential development purposes until the investigative committee had completed its report.⁸⁰ He said that the office of the president would make several other announcements during the next couple of days concerning reforms. Rumors were abounding that government officials had allocated public land to relatives and friends or for fake commercial agricultural and business projects in exchange for kickbacks.

While Barzani's office was tackling misappropriation of public land, Abdul Karim Haidar, head of the Fact Finding Committee, announced at a press conference on April 27, 2011, that "a number of people are responsible for the shootings in Sulaimaniya and that the authorities must put those people on trial."⁸¹ Some ten people were killed, seven hundred wounded, and two hundred arrested during the demonstrations.⁸² Haidar blamed the Sulaimaniya security officers for failing to control the demonstrators who targeted the KDP.⁸³

Pishtwan Ali, head of the legal office in the cabinet, noted the report of the Fact Finding Committee indicated that while Sulaimaniya authorities had given a permit to three individuals for a three-hour demonstration in solidarity with Tunisian and Egyptian people in early 2011, the event was turned into antigovernment protests by opposition groups. The report stated that the demonstrators had used strong abusive languages, calling for the downfall of the government, and later walked to the fourth KDP branch headquarters, hurling insults and stones at party officials. In self-defense, the KDP headquarter guards fired live ammunition into the crowd, killing one.

The investigative committee called on President Barzani to invite Kurdistan's political factions to a roundtable gathering in order to settle the conflict peaceably. People were skeptical that the KRG would ever bring those responsible for killing demonstrators to justice.⁸⁴ Barzani ordered on August 29, 2011, that all individuals involved in attacking demonstrators should face justice.⁸⁵

Fu'ad Hussein, who chaired the Higher Investigating Committee's meeting on May 12, said that a number of subcommittees would be formed to follow up on the implementation of Barzani's reform decisions.⁸⁶ Hussein added that the Higher Committee, linked to the president's office, would also focus on irregularities in selecting and implementing private agricultural and residential projects.⁸⁷ On June 14, Barzani announced three pages of decisions and instructions to the KRG in order to address issues ranging from mismanagement of public land to strengthening of the judicial system and law enforcement.⁸⁸ While Barzani claimed that this was

only the first phase of his reform plan, some critiques questioned his sincerity "because of so many broken promises in the past."⁸⁹

The investigative committee reported on June 24, "so far 118 [appropriated] pieces of land have been revoked, adding that 1025 Donums [a Donum equals 2,500 square meters] of land have been returned to the government."⁹⁰ Aziz Sa'id, head of projects at the Investment Board Association, told reporters that appropriation of public land in Sulaimaniya would be scrutinized in order to prevent further foul play. Yasin Faqi Sa'id announced that while 70 tourism projects were under review, only 2 projects had been revoked so far. Faraydoon Omar, head of the Sulaymaniya agricultural department, told reporters that in response to a request from Barzani's office, "they have sent a list of all agricultural land that has been allocated for projects."⁹¹ Omar claimed, "citizens and officials seizing agricultural land is a major issue in Sulaimaniya province."⁹² Azad Malafandi, head of the reform committee, said that he had thus far focused on Duhok and Arbil and his investigation would soon extend to Sulaimaniya "where around 130 projects are already under review."⁹³ He added that the investigation was comprehensive and that no one acquiring public land illegally would be spared.

Many Kurds were angry about the KRG policy of allocating free land to foreign investors, not local entrepreneurs, to establish new projects. Under the 2006 investment law, designed to attract projects of strategic value, thousands of Donums of land were given away to foreign investors, which Samir Salim, member of the KIU, likened to "looting Kurdistan."⁹⁴ *Rudaw* reported that only about 5 percent of foreign capital had been invested in the two core production sectors, industry and agriculture.⁹⁵

Had Prime Minister Salih taken responsibility for his government's corrupt practices and inability to create jobs, Barzani would not have taken full control of the government reform plan. As if competing with Barzani, Salih timidly announced on May 11 that he had declared his personal assets to the KRG Transparency Committee and had encouraged others in his cabinet to do the same.⁹⁶ Pundits criticized Salih for not taking robust steps to push for legislative instruments that would bring those responsible for corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement to account.

Awena reported that the Sulaimaniya government was bloated due to its growing employment roster. The governorate had 249,000 employees on its payroll plus 77,000 pensioners and 60,000 receiving "other benefits."⁹⁷ Pundits attributed the bloated government to the practice of nepotism and corruption. Shwan Zulal, an independent Kurdish columnist, wrote that the "[q]uickest way to get rich in Kurdistan is to become a politician," and that many KDP and PUK senior members, who "have never run successful businesses in the past," are "the richest people in Kurdistan Region right

now.”⁹⁸ WikiLeaks cables dating back to 2007–2009 reveal, “[T]he U.S. believed corruption in Kurdistan region was pervasive and widespread and could hinder foreign investment in the oil-rich area.”⁹⁹ James Yellin, the US regional coordinator of the US Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT), was critical of the KRG for lack of transparency and corruption during a luncheon meeting sponsored by President Talabani.¹⁰⁰ The RRT doubted the KRG’s ability to deal with the problem effectively, as Talabani had promised. In another leaked cable dated July 22, 2009, “the U.S. embassy in Baghdad welcomed the KRG’s initiative but believed eradicating corruption would be challenging.”¹⁰¹

In order to protect their backs, the KDP and the PUK showered their *peshmarga* with rewards, including free residential units, land, and lucrative monthly salaries or generous pensions for retirees. Kurds were not against rewarding *peshmarga* for their bravery to protect the rights of their people, but they opposed the way the KRG or the KDP or the PUK did it by giving all of them the same benefits regardless of the duration of their services. The Kurdish public was against party officials who enriched their parties, themselves, friends, and relatives through joint business ventures, land development, contract offerings, and issuing import permits.

In reference to the ongoing struggle for power between Kurdistan’s political factions, Nawshirwan Mustafa told the ruling coalition parties of the PUK and the KDP, “You know what we want and we know what you want. We want comprehensive and systemic reforms by changing the one party government as it stands—PUK controlling Sulaimaniya and KDP, Arbil and Duhok area—to one national viable government.”¹⁰² Although the KDP and the PUK had forged a strategic agreement to run in elections as one front and form a unity government in Arbil, they had divided Kurdistan into two geographic regions, which they had ruled separately for several years.¹⁰³

The death, injury, and imprisonment of demonstrators in Sulaimaniya drew considerable internal and international criticisms, prompting the UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon to dispatch his assistant secretary general for human rights, Ivan Simonovic, to Arbil in order to meet with President Barzani about alleged human rights abuses. In the course of assessing the situation, Simonovic “[p]raised the KRG for providing its people security, stability and efficiently functioning institutions in the Kurdistan Region,” and said, “the U.N. appreciates the commitment by the KRG to improve its Human Rights record.”¹⁰⁴ He added, “We are aware of the positive trends in Kurdistan,” and “appreciate KRG efforts to protect women’s rights, including the 30 percent quota for women in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, laws to prohibit female circumcision, and recruitment of policewomen and women police officers.”¹⁰⁵ Barzani promised to call on

all relevant KRG authorities to cooperate with the United Nations in preparation of its report and said that he was committed to improving KRG's law enforcement and human rights records.

While ratcheting up pressure on the central government to address KRG grievances, Barzani tried to put the Kurdish house in order by visiting the Gorran leader Nawshirwan Mustafa in Sulaimaniya on September 23, a move highly praised by pundits.¹⁰⁶ Gorran, which increasingly attracted antiestablishment Kurdish youth, was turning into a major political party in the Kurdish region. Despite major road blocks, Iraqi Kurdistan was making relatively good progress toward a democratic system of government.

Chapter 3

Political and Diplomatic Evolution

While Kurdish bureaucrats managed their home-front affairs and established fundamentals for a de facto state, the Kurdish Diaspora helped the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) representatives explain their people's grievances and aspirations to the international community through seminars and conferences and personal contacts with foreign diplomats, politicians, entrepreneurs, and investors.

In an effort to gain recognition, legitimacy, and international support for their nascent autonomous region, Kurdish politicians did not miss an opportunity to explain the injustices done to their people by successive Arab governments in Baghdad. They underlined the dire need for the international community's protection in order to prevent the recurrence of past atrocities committed against their people. KRG representatives made concerted efforts to link up with state officials in the United States, Europe, Middle East, and Asia in order to explain the progress they had made on the security front and in nation-building and their region's untapped human and natural resources potential for development. While KRG representatives and the Kurdish Diaspora campaigned to remove the old image of the Kurds, created by the neighboring states and colonial powers in the early 1900s as a bunch of thieves and highway robbers, Kurdish politicians on the home front enshrined their national ambitions in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), and later in the new Iraqi constitution.

Although the majority of the Kurdish population wanted to seek their long-standing dream of independence, their political leaders sought coexistence within Iraq's boundaries, fearing retaliation from the United States and the neighboring states. Talabani's remark "let them dream" was indicative that he and other Kurdish political leaders had received stern warnings

from Turkey and the United States not to pursue the route of independence. Despite the fact that Kurdish politicians had repeatedly stated that they would not seek independence as long as the new Iraq became a democratic and federal state that would provide the Kurds with maximum autonomy to run their own affairs, the neighboring states remained suspicious of their intentions.

The Kurds had to prove by deeds to Iraqi Arabs and to their neighbors that they truly sought peace, coexistence, and Iraq's unity. The 2005 and 2010 nationwide elections accorded the Kurds an excellent opportunity to prove that they were peacemakers and not warmongers by establishing an equal distance from Sunni and Shiite Arabs in their disputes and acting as arbitrators between them for maintaining Iraq's unity and territorial integrity. The role played by the KRG in the protracted sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Arabs turned the Kurds into peacemakers and their region into a haven for those, especially Christian families, who escaped the brunt of the civil war in the center and south. The Kurdistan Region also turned into a gateway for foreign investors and contractors to enter the center and south of Iraq and a resting place for those who wanted to escape the summer heat of Baghdad. The Kurdish *peshmarga* played a monumental role in maintaining the security of the region and isolating it from the devastating civil war in the center and south.

While carefully navigating home-front turbulent waters, the KRG pursued a measured and systematic engagement with the outside world in order to win political recognition, legitimacy, and to earn foreign investors and diplomatic trust. To achieve these goals, the KRG engaged in an aggressive diplomatic and business campaign to entice foreign investors and entrepreneurs to develop the region's rich natural and human resources. In addition to its moderate climatic condition, the region is endowed with rich farmland, abundance of water, and large oil and gas resources.

The KRG's ability to enforce law and order, by effectively deploying its *peshmarga*, created a safe and secure environment in the region for incoming refugees, tourists, and members of the diplomatic corps in Baghdad, including the US military fighting the insurgency and terrorist groups in the center and south. During 2003–2012, the three Kurdish provinces witnessed only a few minor incidents of violence. The relative stability of the region and the warmth of its people encouraged visiting foreign diplomats and US military personnel to return to Arbil even after their official assignments as consultants and investors.

The initial visits to the region by members of foreign diplomatic missions to Iraq turned into regular visits, during which they exchanged views with KRG officials concerning the security and political situation in the region and Iraq. The relative safety of the region, lax tax and investment

laws, and generous incentives provided in the form of long-term land leases attracted many investors and contractors from a number of countries, led by Turkey, which initially shunned KRG officials for not cooperating with them to fight Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party—Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK)—in the Qandil Mountain. Turkish contractors, entrepreneurs, and investors found a gold mine in Iraqi Kurdistan, which also served as their gateway into the rest of the country. The KRG used its 17 percent share of Iraq's oil revenue wisely by building highways, airports, schools, and public buildings.

It was still too early to tell whether the KRG would be able to dissuade its neighbors through economic incentives from continued interference in its internal affairs. The economic and political progress made by the KRG since 1991 led to a renowned expert, Parag Khanna, former election advisor to President Barack Obama, to predict, "The Iraqi Kurds will win independence by 2016, and Iraq and neighboring Turkey and Syria, who are now principally against the establishment of a Kurdish state, will accept the reality."¹ Khanna also said, "I believe that incentives can be aligned for Turkey and Syria and Iraq, though I am less sure about Iran. Yet Iran has traditionally had less dispute with the Kurds."² He argued that if the joint venture Nabucco gas pipeline extending from Azerbaijan to Europe, through Turkey, materialized, Iraqi Kurds' chances for independence would increase, especially since Turkish businessmen would become major beneficiaries of Iraqi Kurdistan's estimated 3–6 trillion cubic meters of gas reserve. He added that oil and gas reserves of Iraqi Kurdistan would play an important role in determining its future political status. Khanna suggested, "One of the key steps is to make clear that the borders [of an independent Kurdistan] would be those of Iraqi Kurdistan."³

Massoud Barzani Visits Kuwait

With its considerable untapped potential for tourism, the Kurdistan Region turned into an attractive destination for Gulf states' tourists and investors, who had already made heavy investments in Syria and Lebanon. After the Syrian uprising of 2011, the Kurdistan Region became an even more attractive destination, especially when the Syrian conflict spilled over to Lebanon in early 2012.

Following the December 2005 elections in Iraq, the newly elected KRG president Barzani paid a two-day official visit to Kuwait on May 12, 2006, with a view to strengthening diplomatic and commercial ties with their next-door neighbor, which had been at odds with successive Sunni

Arab governments in Baghdad for not recognizing Kuwait's sovereignty.⁴ Wittingly, Barzani took advantage of the bad blood that had existed between the former Iraqi Ba'ath government under Saddam Hussein and Kuwait to promote the friendly face of the Kurdish community in Iraq.

Sheikh Nasir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, the minister of the royal court, accorded Barzani and his delegation a royal welcome at the Kuwait International airport. Barzani was accompanied by a large delegation, who were later received by Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jabir al-Sabah, the amir of Kuwait, at a luncheon held in their honor. This was indeed a great honor for Kurdish officials to be received at such a high level for the first time by a neighboring Arab state. In an effort to avoid political sensitivity, Barzani focused attention on Iraq rather than on the Kurdistan Region during his news conference, when he said that the new Iraq, which has inherited a heavy debt burden from the former regime, would settle its disputes with Kuwait amicably.⁵

Low Key Diplomacy Pays Dividend

The rapidly growing administrative and diplomatic competence of KRG officials took many observers by surprise and attracted the attention of foreign diplomatic missions, who came to the region to escape the tense security situation in Baghdad and exchange views with KRG officials about the escalating violence in Iraq. In order to avoid assassination attempts and roadside and suicide car bomb attacks, members of foreign diplomatic missions had restricted themselves to the confines of the heavily guarded Green Zone in Baghdad. The Green Zone was under frequent insurgent artillery attacks, making the daily life for foreign diplomats and Iraqi officials very tense.

France was the leading European pioneer in establishing a Consulate General in Arbil in 2006. The first secretary of the French Embassy in Baghdad visited Arbil on June 6, 2006, and met with a number of KRG officials, including deputy speaker of the regional parliament, Kamal Kirkuki. He praised the KRG for its efforts to reconstruct and develop the region.⁶ Kirkuki welcomed the French diplomat and told him that he looked forward to closer cooperation with the French diplomats in Baghdad and Arbil. France had established friendly ties with Iraqi Kurds ever since Saddam Hussein's army drove thousands of Kurds out of their homes and to the mountains in the middle of winter 1991, following their failed uprising.

In the name of solidarity with the United States, South Korea sent several thousand noncombatant troops to Iraqi Kurdistan following the

2003 war in order to help KRG reconstruct villages and towns destroyed by Saddam Hussein's army during the ethnic cleansing campaign against the Kurds in 1988. On June 5, 2006, the South Korean ambassador in Baghdad traveled to Arbil in order to meet with Korean soldiers serving in the Kurdistan Region and met with President Barzani. The ambassador congratulated Barzani on behalf of his government on the occasion of his reelection as KRG president following the December 2005 elections. Barzani thanked the South Korean government for sending troops to help reconstruct the Kurdish region.⁷ The Korean ambassador, Jank Ki Hu, commended the Kurdish security (*peshmarga*) for establishing peace and stability in the region.

In a surprise turn of events, the Arab League representative in Iraq, Mukhtar Lamani, flew from Baghdad to Arbil in order to seek Barzani's advice about organizing a conference to reconcile Sunni and Shiite communities, who were engaged in sectarian fighting. Observers wondered if Lamani was aware that his picture was taken with the Kurdish flag behind him and with no Iraqi flag in sight. Lamani conveyed the greetings of the Arab League secretary general, Amir Musa, to Kurdish leaders and shared with them the outcome of his contacts with Arab political factions in Baghdad.⁸

Amir Musa traveled to Baghdad on January 9, 2011, in an effort to assess the preparatory work done for holding the next Arab League summit in Iraq, which did not materialize because of the Arab Spring uprisings until early 2012. On the occasion, Musa paid a visit to Arbil in order to consult with President Barzani regarding the security situation in Iraq. Musa praised KRG's reconstruction efforts and said that he looked forward to further consultations about the summit.⁹ On his part, Barzani underlined the significance of Musa's visit for Kurdistan by saying that it reflected "Arab Leagues interests and its support [for Kurdistan]."¹⁰

On July 19, 2008, Barzani received the Danish ambassador, B. Webber, who had come to bid him farewell before leaving Iraq. Such visits were normally kept for the Iraqi president, prime minister, and foreign minister. Ambassador Webber was appreciative of Barzani's support for the Iraq's central government and his help for restoring peace and stability to Iraq and for promoting democracy at the national and provincial levels.¹¹ Webber also commended the KRG for the rapid pace of social and economic development in the region. On the same day, Barzani received the Australian ambassador, Mark A. Brown, who also bid him goodbye at the end of his mission to Iraq. Barzani stressed the importance of the Australian government's support for Iraq and the Kurdish region.¹² Brown was appreciative of Barzani's efforts to help promote democracy and stabilize Iraq's security.

In recognition of KRG officials' positive role in keeping peace in Iraq and in their capacity to develop their own region, a number of foreign governments such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, France, Russia, and later Turkey opened consulates and trade centers in Arbil in order to take part in the reconstruction and development of the region. It was noteworthy that many European ambassadors assigned to Baghdad came to consult with President Barzani and other KRG officials in Arbil regarding the unfolding political and security problems in Iraq.

On September 19, 2008, the new Japanese ambassador to Iraq came to Arbil to pay his respect to Barzani at his office in Salahadin. Following the exchange of formal greetings, they discussed the continued violence in the center of Iraq, the status of KRG disputes with Baghdad, and the significance of the pending provincial election law, which he hoped would lead to greater Sunni Arab participation in the government and contribute to Iraq's security and stability.¹³

Paul von Maltsan, German ambassador to Iraq, visited Arbil on January 23, 2010, and told reporters at a news conference that his government was interested in strengthening ties "with Kurdistan Region" and had decided to establish "a direct flight between Frankfurt and Arbil," starting April 2010.¹⁴ He added, "Germany considers Kurdistan Region to be one of the most significant areas for Germany. Thus, we plan to expand the German Consulate for general German consultation in Kurdistan Region."¹⁵ The German consul general in Arbil, who accompanied the German ambassador, said that the German Consulate would start issuing visas to local residents of the Kurdistan Region.

By early 2010, and despite opposition from the central government, the KRG had established representations in a number of foreign countries, including Italy, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, United Kingdom, and the United States.¹⁶ On May 20, 2010, President Barzani received the new South Korean ambassador to Iraq, Sok Bom Park, at his office in Salahadin. Barzani expressed his condolences to the South Korean people for the loss of soldiers in a submarine incident, allegedly destroyed by North Korea.¹⁷ The Korean ambassador expressed his admiration for the level of stability and the pace of reconstruction in the region, which he attributed to Barzani's wisdom and the Kurdish people's determination. He added that the people of South Korea were proud of *Zaytuna* Brigade's role in building the region's infrastructure and looked forward to continued cooperation in developing the region's economy.¹⁸ He extended his government's invitation to Barzani to visit South Korea at his convenience.¹⁹ Barzani accepted the invitation and thanked the people and the government of South Korea, especially the *Zaytuna* Brigade for helping the people of Kurdistan.²⁰

The Egyptian consul general, Sulaiman Othman, paid a visit to the KRP speaker, Kamal Kirkuki, on November 29, 2010, in order to touch base with him regarding the evolving security and political situation in the country.²¹ Othman was full of praise for the democratic experiment in the region and offered his country's help to participate in the reconstruction of the region. He praised Barzani's initiative to break the political gridlock following the March 7, 2010, elections, and praised Barzani's mediation role between Iraq's political factions, which he said reflected the maturity and wisdom of the Kurdish people.²² Kirkuki looked forward to closer cooperation with Egypt in spheres of social and economic development.

The Canadian ambassador, Margaret Hoover, traveled to Arbil on July 13, 2010, to bid farewell to Barzani first and then to his foreign affairs director, Falah Mustafa, emphasizing the importance of strengthening commercial and diplomatic ties between the two sides.²³ Barzani praised her efforts for strengthening her government's ties with Iraq as well as the Kurdistan Region and wished her success in her next assignment.

KRG Courts Foreign Diplomats

KRG officials continued their diplomatic offensive in an effort to improve their feasibility, legitimacy, and acceptance at regional and international levels. The region's safety, security, and economic potential for oil and gas production attracted many neighboring and European companies to invest large sums of money in diverse infrastructure and small-scale industrial projects, roads, highways, housing, and agriculture. By January 22, 2010, there were some 16 active diplomatic representations in the region.

President Barzani courted foreign diplomats in Iraq at banquets in Arbil in an effort to explain to them the region's beauty and economic potential and asked them to encourage their businessmen to invest in the region's diverse sectors. While welcoming the diplomatic corps, Barzani expressed his appreciation for their work and for visiting Kurdistan and looked forward to seeing other countries follow their footsteps. He offered KRG's help to facilitate their work in Iraq and Kurdistan and wanted them to convey the true picture of Kurdistan and its people to their governments.²⁴

Oliver Schnakenberg, German consul general, told Barzani, "It is an honor to speak on behalf of the diplomatic missions in Arbil," expressing their appreciation for giving them the opportunity to renew their friendship and strengthen bilateral ties with the Kurdistan Region.²⁵ Schnakenberg commended KRG's achievements during 2009 in areas of security, construction, counterterrorism, and holding successful provincial elections in

2009 and hoped that the next government following the March 2010 elections would address the pending discords between Arbil and Baghdad concerning disputed Kurdish land, oil law, *peshmarga*, and revenue sharing.²⁶

Noting the relative success of the aforementioned gathering, the KRG extended invitations to some 40 foreign ambassadors and consul generals in Iraq to Newroz celebrations. The response was overwhelmingly positive. European, Asian, Arab, US and Latin American diplomats flocked to Arbil to witness the Newroz (Kurdish New Year) festivities and enjoy Kurdistan's mild spring weather on March 21, 2009.²⁷ The KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, welcomed his guests and wished them a joyful Newroz celebration. Barzani took pride in telling his guests about the ongoing reconstruction and development activities under the peaceful skies of Kurdistan. He hoped that the Kurdistan Region would witness more foreign government representations during the coming years. The foreign guests expressed their appreciation for KRG's hospitality and for arranging the gathering.²⁸

During Newroz celebrations of March 21, 2011, foreign diplomats once again inundated Arbil and had good words for KRG officials for having maintained peace and stability in the region, and for pursuing an active development program. Additionally, some eleven thousand Iranian Kurds crossed the border from Iran's Kurdistan through the Haji Umran crossing to celebrate Newroz in Iraqi Kurdistan, where they had greater freedoms and no fear of being harassed by Iranian security.²⁹

In assessing the accomplishments of the KRG, the *National* wrote on February 3, 2010, that the Kurds had become less dogmatic and more realistic since 1991 and that they understand "the international status quo would force them to reconnect with Baghdad."³⁰ The Kurds had no other realistic alternative but to carefully manage their affairs in line with US policy in Iraq and avoid the repetition of the 1975 betrayal—let bygones be bygones. However, it was for history to record the notorious response of the former US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, to a question by US Congress as to why the United States abandoned the Kurds to be slaughtered by Saddam Hussein in 1975. He had simply replied, "One should not confuse undercover action with social work."³¹ Despite the sacrifices they made to support the US troops in Iraq during the 2003 Iraq War, the Kurds feared that the United States might marginalize them if they got out of line with their Iraq policy. Having enjoyed a quasi-state status from 1991 to 2003, the Kurds were obliged to rejoin Iraq following the 2003 war on condition that there would be a federal democratic system of government that would grant them maximum regional autonomy.³² It was acceptable to the United States as long as the Kurds did not declare independence. Pundits admired, "The Kurdistan state-building experiment in northern

Iraq, even if only within the limits of autonomy, is far from perfection. Yet it is one of the most impressive in the Middle East. It should certainly serve as a model for several Arab countries to emulate.”³³

Kurdish Officials Visit Arab Capitals

The Kurdistan Region witnessed high-level diplomatic contacts between the KRG and regional Arab states’ officials during 2010. President Barzani received a high-level delegation from Libya on January 17, headed by Mahmoud Jabril, secretary of the People’s Council for Economic Development; Ali Yusifi, Qadhafi Internal Foundation; and Hatim al-Gharyani, Libyan Investment Corporation and director of the Libyan Petroleum Corporation.³⁴ The delegation praised the peace and stability established in the Kurdish Region and had high marks for Kurdish people holding to their ancestral land, which they said was now ruled by wise leaders. The delegation expressed Libya’s interests in contributing to the region’s development and looked forward to establishing friendly ties between Libya and the Kurdish Region, emphasizing that the Libyan leader Mu’ammar Qadhafi had high regard for the people of Kurdistan and for their struggle.³⁵ President Barzani praised the good relationship between the people of Kurdistan and Libya and said that the Kurds would not forget Qadhafi’s support for the Kurdish people. These exchanges took place before Qadhafi’s downfall and international condemnation of his government for massacring its people during the Arab Spring uprising in 2011.

A month following the March 7, 2010, elections in Iraq, King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia suddenly invited Iraqi president Talabani and the KRG president Barzani, both Kurds, to Riyadh in order to honor them for their role in keeping Iraq united.³⁶ However, pundits opined that King Abdullah was trying to sway the Kurds in favor of the Iraqiya List (IL), dominated by Sunni Arabs, and away from the Shiite bloc, allegedly with close ties to Iran. Although the IL had won 91 seats, 2 seats more than the United Alliance of the Shiite bloc, the former was unable to break the 163 threshold required to form Iraq’s next government. The Kurds leaned more toward the Shiite bloc because they did not trust the Sunni-Arab-dominated IL.

King Abdullah, who received Talabani in his office at the Yamama Palace in Riyadh, claimed that he held the same distance from Iraq’s political blocs and had no intention of interfering in Iraq’s internal affairs.³⁷ He said that in appreciation of Talabani’s role in unifying Iraqis, he bestowed

on him the Saudi Arabia's highest medal of honor of King Abdul Aziz, awarded only to the kingdom's honored guests. He assured Talabani that his government supported a stable, peaceful, and united Iraqi government representing Iraq's political factions. Talabani expressed appreciation for King Abdullah's invitation and for supporting Iraq's political process.³⁸ The Saudi foreign minister, Sa'ud al-Faisal, and not King Abdullah, received Talabani at the airport. As a sign of displeasure with a Shiite-dominated government, led by Prime Minister al-Maliki, King Abdullah refused to send a Saudi ambassador to Baghdad during 2005–2011.

KRG president Barzani traveled to Riyadh on April 12, 2010, the same day that King Abdullah met with Talabani.³⁹ Fu'ad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, and Kamiron Ahmed Abdullah, minister of reconstruction, accompanied Barzani to Riyadh. Hussein told reporters that the purpose of Barzani's visit to Riyadh was to hold consultations with King Abdullah and other Saudi officials about the ongoing political stalemate in Iraq. Observers thought that King Abdullah's invitation to the two vulnerable top Kurdish officials must have been to sway them to break the political stalemate in favor of the IL and that the Saudis' claim of neutrality was baseless.

Fu'ad Hussein told reporters that Barzani would travel from Riyadh to Beirut on an official invitation from Lebanese prime minister Sa'ad al-Hariri. He said the purpose of the visit to Lebanon, which would take several days, was to strengthen economic and cultural ties between the two sides.⁴⁰ Following his brief visit to Saudi Arabia, Barzani traveled to Beirut, where he was received at the airport on April 13, 2010, by Prime Minister Sa'ad al-Hariri, Environmental Minister Mohammed Rahhal, and the Egyptian and Iraqi ambassadors to Lebanon.⁴¹

Safin Dizayee, KRG minister of education, who accompanied Barzani to Saudi Arabia and Beirut, told reporters on April 16 that President Barzani had invited both Sa'ad Hariri and the Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Birri to Iraqi Kurdistan in an effort to strengthen ties between Arbil and Beirut.⁴² He added that both had accepted the invitation and looked forward to visiting the Kurdistan Region.

Upon an official invitation, Barzani traveled to Amman, Jordan, on July 3, 2010, raising speculations that King Abdullah might also be pressing the Kurds to support the IL and rescind claim to the presidency in favor of Sunni Arabs.⁴³ Pundits claimed that King Abdullah of Jordan had told Barzani that he supported the idea of promoting trade, commerce, and cultural exchange, and opening a Jordanian consulate in Arbil if the Kurds gave up their demand to the presidency, which should go to the IL.⁴⁴ Barzani was appreciative of the warm reception he had received from the Jordanian king Abdullah and the respect shown for the Kurdish people.

Before leaving for Jordan, Barzani received a telephone call from US vice president Joseph Biden, wishing him success on his shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East.⁴⁵ Pundits claimed that Biden and US embassies in Riyadh, Amman, Lebanon, and Cairo might have played a role in arranging Barzani's Middle East tours. Barzani traveled to Cairo on July 4, 2010, and met with Mahmoud Muhyadin, the Egyptian minister of investment; Mohammed Qassim, assistant foreign minister for Arab affairs and the publicity director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Iraqi ambassador Nazar Issa Khayrullah in Cairo and Ambassador Qais al-Azzawi, Iraqi representative at the Arab League, received Barzani at the Cairo airport.⁴⁶ While in Cairo, Barzani also met with President Husni Mubarak and Ahmed Abu al-Ghaith, Egypt's foreign minister, at the Presidential Palace and exchanged views on the political stalemate in Iraq and pending disputes between Arbil and Baghdad.⁴⁷ Mubarak and Barzani agreed that it was important for Iraq to establish a broad-based government, inclusive of all major political factions. During a news conference, Abu al-Ghaith said that Mubarak had decided to open two consulates in Iraq, one in the Kurdistan Region and another in Basra.⁴⁸

Kurdish Diplomacy in Arab States Pay Dividend

Pundits argued that Arab states such as Jordan and Egypt, who had distanced themselves from the Kurds in the past, had opened up to them after seeing that the Kurds were keeping the same distance from Sunni and Shiite Arab political factions. Others argued that the Arab states were pressing the Kurds to line up with the IL, dominated by Sunni Arab political figures, against the Shiite bloc, led by al-Maliki, whom they accused of being too close to their archenemy, Iran.

By exercising effective governance, moderation, and law enforcement, while the rest of Iraq was in disarray, Kurdish officials were able to win the trust, admiration, and respect of some of the neighboring states as well as US and European states. The Kurds demonstrated that they were a positive and not a destabilizing force in the Middle East as they had alleged earlier. The repeated self-deprecating phrase used by President Talabani that a "Kurdish state was unrealistic" sent assurances to Arab states, the United States, and Turkey that Iraqi Kurds had a moderating affect on Kurdish minorities in the neighboring states by seeking coexistence, democracy, individual freedom, regional autonomy rather than independence.⁴⁹

KRG officials sent delegations to the regional states in order to establish close ties and gain their trust, respect, recognition, and legitimacy. The

KRG prime minister Barham Salih, accompanied by a large delegation, visited the Egyptian prime minister Ahmed Nadhif in Cairo on November 1, 2010, during which the two sides discussed investment opportunities in the Kurdistan Region as well as ways and means to strengthen ties.⁵⁰ During a joint news conference, with Magdi Radhi, spokesman for the Egyptian prime minister's office, Salih opined that Kurdistan's experience was unique for maintaining security, political stability, and economic prosperity and called on Egyptian and Arab private investors to participate in Kurdistan's reconstruction.

While in Cairo, Salih visited the Arab League secretary general Amir Musa and discussed the ongoing political stalemate in Iraq and Barzani's roundtable initiative to bring Iraq's political factions closer together in order to expedite forming the next government. At a joint news conference, Salih told reporters that his meeting with Musa also covered the Saudi invitation to Iraqi political factions to meet in Riyadh under Arab League auspices.⁵¹ Musa said that they had dwelled on current political development in Iraq and the importance of forming an inclusive partnership national government. He added that he had informed the Kurdish envoy that the Arab League had decided to open an office in Arbil in addition to that in Baghdad in an effort to show the Arab League's even-handed approach in dealing with Iraq's diverse components.⁵² Salih noted that the opening of an Arab League office in Arbil emphasized the special status of the Kurdistan Region as an integral part of Iraq.

While many Kurdish politicians claimed that the Saudi initiative to invite Iraq's political factions to Riyadh was meant to undermine Barzani's initiative, Salih welcomed it by saying it was a message of peace and reflected King Abdullah's concern about Iraq's future and that the KRG had always called for an active Arab role in Iraq. He added that the Saudi initiative backed Iraqi people's rights to choose their own government and that this was in line with Barzani's initiative. Salih added that while Barzani's initiative has made progress, Iraqis welcomed King Abdullah's role in the ongoing national reconciliation efforts.⁵³

In less than two months after President Barzani's visit to Cairo, the Egyptian government sought and received Iraqi government approval on August 17, 2010, to open two consulates in Iraq, one in Basra and another in Arbil. The Egyptian ambassador, Sharif Shaheen, while in Baghdad visited Arbil on August 18, 2010, seeking KRG's permission and support to open a consulate in Arbil with a view to handling Egyptian commercial and diplomatic affairs.⁵⁴ Ambassador Shaheen submitted a request to the KRG's foreign affairs director, Falah Mustafa, and discussed ways and means of strengthening commercial and cultural ties between the two sides. Mustafa welcomed Shaheen to Kurdistan and thanked the Egyptian government for

opening a consulate in Arbil.⁵⁵ He added that this was the first step by an Arab state to open a consulate in Arbil and he looked forward to other Arab governments doing the same. Shaheen expressed appreciation for the assistance offered by the KRG to the Egyptian trade and political delegations, which visited Kurdistan during July 2010. The two sides also discussed the political stalemate in Iraq and the urgency to form the next government.⁵⁶

The Egyptian government announced on October 25, 2010, that Sulaiman Othman had been nominated to head their consulate, which was to be opened during December 2010.⁵⁷ President Barzani received Egyptian consul general Sulaiman Osman at his office on November 25 and thanked President Husni Mubarak of Egypt for his decision to open a consulate in Arbil, which he described as a first step to developing stronger ties between Cairo and the Kurdistan Region.⁵⁸ After thanking Barzani for his warm reception and support, Sulaiman said that his task was to facilitate "visits for Egyptian businesses and companies to the Kurdistan Region," and that plans were "underway to arrange direct flights between the Kurdistan Region and Cairo by January 2011."⁵⁹

Less than two months after President Barzani's visit to Amman, Jordan, Amir al-Hadidi, Jordanian minister of industry and trade, along with a large delegation, visited Arbil on August 31, 2010, and met with KRG officials in an effort to establish a diplomatic and commercial center in Arbil.⁶⁰ Al-Hadidi told reporters that he had discussed at separate meetings with President Barzani and Prime Minister Salih ways to boost commercial ties with Kurdistan and encourage "Jordanian businessmen to come and invest in Kurdistan as there are several investment opportunities in the region."⁶¹ He added that he had scheduled a number of "meetings with investors, traders and businessmen in Kurdistan during his visit," in order to explore investment opportunities in the region.

On October 24, 2010, Mustafa received Mohammed Taysir, Jordanian ambassador in Baghdad, and discussed preparatory arrangements for the establishment of a Jordanian consulate in Arbil.⁶² Ambassador Taysir said that this was the start of a new era of relationship with the Kurdistan Region and that he and his delegation had come to implement King Abdullah's instructions in an effort to establish solidarity and cooperation with the people and government of the Kurdistan Region.⁶³ Both sides also exchanged notes about the ongoing political efforts to establish a partnership national government in Baghdad.

Kurdish officials expected other Arab states to follow suit since Egypt was the leading Arab state to establish a consulate in Arbil. A number of Arab leaders and businessmen from Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait had already visited the Kurdistan Region and invested large sums of money in the construction of hotels and housing complexes.⁶⁴

KRG Strengthen Ties With Iran

Despite regional governments' suspicion of KRG's national aspiration, they increasingly accepted them for promoting Iraq's unity and territorial integrity and for not declaring independence while the rest of Iraq was engulfed in sectarian violence. Tehran, with a large Kurdish population of about eight million, extended an invitation to KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani in order to touch base with them regarding regional security and trade.

Prime Minister Barzani, accompanied by a large delegation, visited Tehran on August 8, 2008, to discuss with Iranian officials ways to reach a better understanding regarding the status of the KRG, improve security along the border, and promote commercial ties between the two sides. Being under stringent Western economic sanctions, because of its nuclear enrichment program and anti-Israel rhetoric, Iran sought to strengthen its political and commercial ties with its neighbors. KRG officials also wanted to press Tehran to stop or at least reduce the intensity of Iran's artillery shelling of Iraq's Kurdish villages while targeting Iranian Kurdish rebel fighters—Partiye Jiyani Azadi Kurdistan or Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK)—and hideouts.⁶⁵

Iran's deputy president, Ali Sa'ïd Luu, and the KRG representative in Tehran, Nadhim Omer, received Barzani and his delegation at the airport. Without mentioning the KRG, Luu stressed the historical ties between Iran and Iraq and called for stronger relationship between the two people, as if Barzani was representing the Iraqi government. In response, Barzani expressed his appreciation for the invitation and hoped it would lead to improved regional security and expanded trade. Barzani held discussions with Ridha Sheikh Attar, first deputy foreign minister, and the Iranian Chamber of Commerce in order to facilitate the flow of tourists and commodities across the border. Iranian officials called on the KRG to prevent the Iranian PJAK, stationed on the Iraqi side of the border, from attacking Iranian territories. On August 12, 2008, Barzani paid a courtesy visit to the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran, who cordially received and exchanged views with him about the security situation on the border with Iran.⁶⁶ Barzani also paid a visit to Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, a close Kurdish ally and head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), who was undergoing treatment for cancer in Darband, Iran.

After returning to Erbil, Prime Minister Barzani briefed members of his cabinet on August 20, 2008, about the outcome of his visit to Tehran.⁶⁷ The meeting praised the evolving relationship between the

KRG and the Islamic Republic of Iran and said the people of Kurdistan had not forgotten Iran's help while struggling for freedom under Saddam Hussein's government. They recalled Iranian generosity in sheltering thousands of Iraqi refugees, Kurds, and Arabs, who escaped the Iraqi army's revenge attacks following their failed uprisings in 1991. Members of the KRG cabinet emphasized that it was important to maintain strong economic and diplomatic ties with Iran and called for removing existing barriers hindering Iranian participation in Kurdistan's reconstruction. The cabinet was also appreciative of Iran's respect for the Iraqi constitution, which recognized the rights of the Kurdish people.⁶⁸ The meeting reiterated KRG's total commitment to Iraq's constitution and called for ways to prevent PJAK from using Kurdistan's soil as a launchpad to attack Iran.

Nechirvan Barzani's visit to Tehran was followed by a three-day visit of President Massoud Barzani to Iran in order to firm up the preliminary discussions held earlier on border security, Iraq-US security agreement, trade, and technical cooperation. This time, Iranian foreign minister Manoushehr Muttaki and the Iraqi ambassador Mohammed Majid received Barzani at the airport.⁶⁹ At a meeting with Barzani, Saeed Jalili, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, emphasized to Barzani that Iraq deserved to be politically stable and economically prosperous and expressed Tehran's concerns about continued foreign occupation of Iraq. Iran was concerned about the US military occupation of Iraq and feared that they might try to destabilize Iran. Barzani assured Jalili by saying, "We will never allow any action against Iran from Iraq."⁷⁰ Barzani also told Muttaki on October 22, 2008, that Iraqis would never allow foreign aggression against Iran from Iraq; the Kurds had no plan to split from Iraq and that he would do his level best to seek the release of Iranian officials arrested by US forces in Arbil. Barzani signed a number of memoranda of understanding concerning issues related to transport, trade, energy, information technology, sanitation, and establishing new border crossings between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷¹ While assuring Iranian officials of Iraq's opposition to a US attack on Iran from Iraq, Barzani said, "There [was] nothing better than the current version [of the US-Iraq security draft agreement] calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from cities by mid 2009 and from all of Iraq by 2011."⁷²

While in Tehran, Barzani also met with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on October 23, 2008, and discussed with him a number of issues, including the Iraq-US security agreement, status of Iranian prisoners in Iraq, and PJAK operations in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷³ Observers claimed that the Iranian invitation to Barzani was motivated by preventing US and

PJAK attacks on Iran through shared Iraqi Kurdistan border crossings. Iranian officials accused the United States of supporting PJAK to attack Iranian targets from Qandil Mountain in an effort to destabilize Iran. Iranian officials also pressed Barzani not to let things get out of control in Arabized Kurdish territories such as Khanaqin, close to Iran's border.

In an effort to maintain close contacts with Kurdish officials in Arbil, the new Iranian ambassador, Hassan Danai, who replaced Hassan Qumi, paid a courtesy visit to President Barzani in Salahadin on September 7, 2010. Barzani welcomed Danai to Kurdistan, wished him success on his new assignment, and offered him his full cooperation to improve ties with Tehran.⁷⁴ Ambassador Danai expressed Iran's interest in strengthening ties and collaboration with the KRG as well as Iraq. The two exchanged views about the political stalemate in Iraq and expediting forming a new government in Baghdad.

Iran pressed the sharply divided Shiite political factions to unite against the IL, which was dominated by Ba'athists and former Saddam Hussein loyalists, who had fought Iran in a bloody, eight-year war during 1980–1988. Under Iranian pressure, the followers of the anti-American cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, who initially opposed al-Maliki's reelection as prime minister, reversed position on October 1, 2010, to support his candidature.⁷⁵ Since the Kurds, with 57 seats in the parliament, were closer to the Shiite than to the Sunni bloc, al-Maliki was now in a position to form a government.

Tehran, which helped Iraq's Kurdish rebel fighters (the KDP and the PUK) to fight Saddam Hussein's army for autonomy during the 1980s, was first among the neighboring states to establish diplomatic ties with KRG by opening two consulates, one in Arbil and another in Sulaimaniya. However, despite good relationship between the two sides, Iranian artillery shells, targetting PJAK bases, hit Kurdish villagers, killing innocent Kurds and destroying their homes, livestock, orchards, and crops, making thousands of families homeless.

Following a roundtable meeting of Iraqi political leaders in Arbil on November 8, 2010, President Barzani dispatched Fadhil Mirani, the KDP chairman, and Nechirvan Barzani, his deputy, to Tehran in order to apprise Iran of current political events in Iraq.⁷⁶ In a telephone conversation, Fu'ad Hussein told *Ajans a Peyamner* that Ali Larinjani, speaker of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) received the KRG delegation warmly in Tehran and discussed a number of issues, including the outcome of Barzani's roundtable initiative to break Iraq's political stalemate. The KRG delegation also briefed Saeed Jalili and apprised him of the evolving political situation in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.⁷⁷ The Arbil roundtable meeting was designed to break the political stalemate between the Sunni and Shiite blocs that prevented al-Maliki from forming a government following the

March 2010 elections.⁷⁸ The roundtable was initiated by the president on September 16, who formed a committee of 8–12 members representing Iraq's political blocs in order to settle their differences and "discuss the issue of the formation of a government of national partnership, as well as the settlement of the issue of the three leading presidencies."⁷⁹

In the face of continued allegations by regional Sunni Arab states and US officials that Iran interfered in Iraq's political affairs, Tehran preferred to watch events from afar as opposed to Turkey. While the United States and Sunni Arab states maintained silence when Ankara dispatched its foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, first to Arbil and then Baghdad, allegedly to mediate on behalf of Sunni Arabs, who dominated the IL, they accused Tehran of interference. As a sound neighborly diplomatic gesture, the KRG took the initiative to apprise Iranian officials of recent political developments in their region and Iraq so that they would not feel that their next-door neighbor was weaving some sort of a conspiracy against them.

A photograph of Nechirvan Barzani sitting next to the Iranian speaker, Ali Larinjani, showed that both politicians were relaxed and smiling while exchanging views about the situation in Iraq.⁸⁰ Larinjani told Barzani that Iraq's unity and political stability were beneficial not only to the Iraqi people but to the entire region. Barzani wanted to reassure Tehran that the KRG would not allow the United States and regional Sunni Arab states to marginalize Iraq's Shiite majority. He said that the Kurds favored al-Maliki over others, meaning Iyad Allawi of the IL, to lead the next government and "Baghdad will not allow anyone to damage the amicable ties between Tehran and Iraq's Kurdistan."⁸¹ Iran found in Arbil a more hospitable environment than in Baghdad, where Sunni Arab political factions, the United States, and regional Sunni Arab diplomatic corps watched every step taken by any Iranian, let alone diplomats, visiting Baghdad.

The new KRG prime minister Barham Salih, accompanied by a large delegation, visited Tehran on January 10, 2011, and held discussions with Saeed Jalili, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, who called for maintaining regional stability and forming a broad-based government in Baghdad.⁸² Salih praised Tehran as "a key player in helping resolve Middle East problems."⁸³ During his meeting with Salih, President Ahmadinejad praised the role played by KRG leaders at local, regional, and international levels and asked the KRG delegation to "pass his greetings to the Kurdish people and their leaders, Talabani and Barzani."⁸⁴ He also said Iran had built closer ties with the Kurdistan Region and Iraq since the downfall of Saddam Hussein. As for Salih, he said he had come to cement KRG's ties with Tehran and brief President Ahmadinejad about the outcome of his meetings with Iranian officials.⁸⁵

Regional Sensitivity to the Kurdish Issue

President Barzani shocked Arab opposition groups within and outside Iraq as well as Turkey while addressing KDP's 13th Congress in Arbil on December 11, 2010. He had asked the Congress to study and analyze the rights of the Kurdish people to self-determination, autonomy versus independence.⁸⁶ Barzani spoke before an audience of more than one thousand delegates, members of foreign missions in Iraq as well a large number of Iraqi politicians, including President Talabani, Prime Minister designate Nouri al-Maliki, and the IL leader Iyad Allawi.

Observers wondered why Barzani raised such a controversial issue while he had mediated between Sunni and Shiite political factions to form a unity government about a month earlier. Barzani's roundtable initiative in November 2010 broke nine months of political gridlock and reset the political process into motion. While delivering a speech at the KDP Congress, al-Maliki reminded the audience that

the initiative of Kurdistan Region's President Barzani had contributed to overcoming a difficult phase that could have rocked Iraq. During the period of opposition against the former regime, the beloved Kurdistan and its honorable people have played an important role in the opposition, when it welcomed our mujahids (fighters) and helped them to face tyranny. Brother Barzani had a role in confronting those difficult days, when he stood against anything that aimed to create division in our ranks. His latest initiative [roundtable initiative] has led to an agreement of the political blocs to form the government.⁸⁷

While Kurdish politicians appreciated al-Maliki's sweet talk, they doubted his sincerity to reciprocate Kurdish support for his coalition.

Neither the Sunni nor the Shiite political coalitions had sufficient seats in the parliament to form a government. Following protracted negotiations with both sides, the Kurdistan Alliance with 57 seats were able to untie the Gordian knot by siding with the Shiite bloc, who they thought would respond more favorably to their demands. However, two years after his reelection, al-Maliki failed to address Kurdish demands on disputed Kurdish areas, the oil law, or the status of *peshmarga*.

Arab nationalist groups were quick to flood the airwaves with harsh criticisms of Barzani, whom they described as divisive. In response, the former KRG prime minister said that President Barzani had merely restated the fact that the Kurdish people had the right to self-determination, including independence, but had chosen to remain within a unified democratic and federal Iraq.⁸⁸ He said that if the Kurds had separatist intentions, they

would not have raised the Iraqi flag next to the Kurdish flag and would not have recited Iraq's national anthem alongside the Kurdish national anthem at the opening of the Congress.⁸⁹

After reconciling some of their differences, Sunni Arab political factions started venting their anger at the Kurds for tipping the political gridlock in favor of the Shiite block. They claimed that allying with the Shiite block would not help the Kurds settle their land dispute with Baghdad since Kurdish disputed areas were in regions Sunni Arabs controlled. However, the Kurds did not trust Sunni Arabs, many of whom had helped or continued to condone Saddam Hussein's ethnic cleansing and Arabization of their land. For those following Iraq's politics, many thought that Barzani's statement was to warn Sunni Arab political factions not to mess around with the Iraqi constitution, which protected the rights of the Kurds.

While talking to the UN representative in Iraq, Arslan Bayiz, deputy KRP speaker, said that some quarters in the Iraqi parliament were trying to abort Article 140 by eliminating it from the Iraqi constitution, which they wanted to revise.⁹⁰ He warned that the Kurdish leadership would not accept any change in the constitution that would adversely affect Iraq's democratic federal system of government or KRG's authority or Article 140.⁹¹

Despite assurances given by Kurdish politicians that they were committed to Iraq's unity, many Arab political factions claimed that they feared the Kurds were on the verge of breaking away from Iraq because the KRG already had its own constitution, parliament, flag, army, border guards, national anthem, education system, international airports, and even a stamp to ink passports of visitors.⁹²

Some members of the IL, such as Alia Nasif, continued attacking Barzani's statement saying, "It makes me wonder if the Kurds asked for federalism [in Iraq constitution] to first form a region and then to separate,"⁹³ and wondered why members of her coalition at the Congress did not react to Barzani's statement. Jawad Hawasi, Shiite and member of al-Sadr Movement, put it more politely by saying, "These declarations [by Barzani's] are not in the best interests of Iraq, and they only serve to raise tensions. I think an Iraq that extends from Zakho to Basra is much better than an Iraq that is divided."⁹⁴ The Turkish *Today's Zaman* wrote, "Most of the criticism came from the Iraqiya List," claiming that Barzani's statement threatened Iraq's stability and unity.⁹⁵ Yassin al-Obeidi, another Sunni Arab lawmaker, claimed that "it is not proper to discuss the right of self-determination and Article 140" and asked the Kurds to stop making such claims and that they considered Kirkuk as a redline.⁹⁶

The KDP's 13th Congress unanimously reelected President Barzani as party leader, and his nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, as his deputy, on December 14, 2010. During his acceptance speech, President Barzani

said the 13th KDP Congress was different from its predecessors in that its members were no more tribal, regional, or sectarian and that the majority of the delegations were young, energetic, and well educated.⁹⁷ He said that he was pleased about the lively professional discussions concerning the party's future prospects. He was critical of those who had twisted his words about the rights of the Kurdish people to self-determination, which he said was merely reiterating earlier statements.⁹⁸ Barzani added, "My message to our Arab brothers, whether they are Sunnis or Shiites, to our friends and allies is the following: we are committed to a federal and democratic Iraq, to its constitution. But we are not prepared to remain in an Iraq dominated by chauvinists."⁹⁹ Barzani called for the unity of the Kurdish house irrespective of party inclination, for focusing on strategic national issues and strengthening the strategic alliance with the PUK, and sought explanations from his party for not extending invitation to all political parties without exception.¹⁰⁰ Members of the Gorran Party lamented that the KDP had not invited them to the KDP's annual Congress.

The divided Kurdish house diverted attention from seeking appropriate ways to resolve the pending disputes over land, oil, and *peshmarga* before the US troop withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011. The Kurds feared that in the absence of a third-party protection such as a US or UN force, they could become victims of the ongoing struggle between Sunni and Shiite political factions for power. Pundits opined that instead of cutting each other's throats, Kurdish political parties should engage in a constructive dialogue that would lead to checks and balances, rigorous democratic practices, and the abandonment of the practice of leadership through inheritance.

Chapter 4

Regional Economic Development and its Negative Fallout

Peshmarga turned the Kurdistan Region into a safe haven for local and external investors, tourists, and for foreign diplomats who escaped the harsh insecure environment of Baghdad during the war. Foreign diplomats enjoyed the safety and security of the Kurdish region as well as its mild weather and people's hospitality.

Kurdish officials practiced an aggressive approach to advertising the potential of their region for development and foreign investment, especially in tourism, infrastructure, and oil and gas exploration. Turkish and Iranian military and diplomatic corps as well as businessmen competed with each other to extend their political and economic influence into Iraqi Kurdistan.

Despite Turkey's frequent threats of war and intimidation, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani made concerted efforts to win the acceptance of Turkey, which was the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) gateway to Europe. The Turkish reporter Cevik Ilnur opined that Barzani's regional government looked forward to closer cooperation with Turkey on issues of mutual interest, especially security, which was essential for economic development.¹ He added that diplomatic and commercial ties with Turkey were already strong and that Turkey was Kurdistan's largest trading partner as reflected in the number of Turkish companies engaged in construction work, oil exploration, and trade in the region.

Turkey initially accused the KRG of interfering in its internal affairs "by issuing ID cards to Turkey's Kurds [PKK] and giving Kurdish students from Turkey university grants."² In response, Barzani said that his government regularly provided scholarships to Kurdish students studying "in the U.S., Sweden, and a host of other countries around the world" and said that it is "in the interest of all to see more cultural exchanges between neighbors."³

Barzani asserted that his government's foremost priority was security and development and it was consulting with "a wide range of private sector officials and international investment experts" to promulgate an investment law that would entice foreign investment in productive and job-creating enterprises.⁴ He added that the details of the law, which was being hammered out, would be submitted to the Kurdistan Regional Parliament (KRP) for approval during the last week of June 2006. He said Kurdistan was now opened to outside investors. The KRG established chambers of commerce in Duhok, Arbil, and Sulaimaniya in order to invite internal and foreign capital and skills to develop the region.

The oil-rich Arab Gulf states became increasingly interested in the Kurdistan Region because of its stability and potential for development.⁵ The United Arab Emirate DAMAC real estate property developer announced in 2008 that it would invest \$4.5 billion in real estate development on the outskirts of Arbil, Kurdistan's regional capital, in order to build hotels and housing complexes.⁶ Al-Maabar International, a Dubai-based property developer, signed a memorandum of understanding during October 2008 with the Sulaimaniya city Chamber of Commerce for real estate development to the tune of \$2 billion.

Kurdistan's Rapid Economic Transformation

During 2003–2007, Iraqi Kurdistan had become

one of the fastest-growing Middle Eastern destinations for workers from impoverished countries such as Ethiopia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Somalia. The non-governmental organizations and human rights advocates became increasingly critical of the KRG for turning a blind-eye to abuses committed by guest workers' agencies, who withheld workers' passports until they had fulfilled terms of their contracts, which were often difficult to meet. Contrary to promises made, guest workers earnings often did not cover fees imposed on them by their agents. They practically became like slave workers, who could not leave the region without their passports.⁷

While war raged in the center and south, mile after mile of new housing projects and hotels rose up within a short span of time, pushing up wages sevenfold and creating more jobs for foreign rather than local workers, since local workers lacked the experience and expertise to engage in large-scale housing projects or manage hotels. Resentment against KRG officials grew over time.

It was the rapid economic and political transformation of the region during the early post-2003 war years that prompted Turkey, Iran, and Syria to hold a series of meetings in order to discourage Iraqi Kurds from declaring independence and inciting their Kurdish minorities to demand the same. In addition to about \$9 billion of KRG's share of Iraq's oil revenue, billions of dollars from Turkey, Gulf States, Europe, and the United States were invested in oil exploration and real estate development projects.⁸ Kurdish commercial and moneymaking talent suddenly exploded in a vibrant market economy.

Max Boot, an award-winning US conservative reporter, wrote on May 20, 2010, "While driving down Baghdad's dingy streets, as I did recently as part of a delegation from the Council on Foreign Relations, one is sometimes tempted to despair. A short trip north to the Kurdish region, where 4.5 million of Iraq's 30 million people live, offers a different, more hopeful perspective."⁹ Boot added that the KRG's *Asayish* (security) and *peshmarga* had been able to keep the Kurdish region safe and stable compared to the rest of Iraq where terrorism lingered. He described the Kurdish region as having a spanking new international airport, shopping malls, banks, stores, homes, and hotels "that would not be out of place in Europe."¹⁰ He claimed that the 17 percent of Iraq's oil revenue received by KRG had fueled the economy of the region, claiming that Kurdish administrators had been more effective in attracting foreign investment compared to the rest of Iraq. He described the Kurds as being "the most pro-American people on the planet," pro-Israeli, and said that their leaders had "shown geopolitical wisdom by not seeking independence."¹¹ Boot opined that the ongoing administrative corruptions and nepotism was milder than those in the rest of Iraq. He argued that while Kurdish officials received bribes, they delivered basic services as compared to larger bribes received by central government officials in offering contracts that did not deliver social services.¹²

A British parliamentary group noted in its annual fact-finding mission to Kurdistan, in its report of January 2011, that "[t]he visible and dynamic economic, political and social progress of Kurdistan Region in Iraq is a major success story. Its booming economy, fast growing living standards and political progress deserve far wider recognition and support, particularly from the U.K."¹³

Investment-Friendly Laws and Wealth Accumulation

Instead of investing the accumulated paper money in industrial and agricultural production, the newly emerging business class directed their newly acquired wealth at purchasing jewelry and land, especially farmland

from traditional farmers, and turning them into tourist and recreation centers. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* wrote that precious stones were now competing with gold and old Ottoman Lira, which was the traditional way to hoard money instead of putting it in banks for circulation in the private sector. The paper added that earlier generations in Kurdistan knew little if any about gems and other precious stones. However, the first decade of the twenty-first century had witnessed the presence of abundance of precious stones on Kurdistan markets sold to the newly emerging wealthy people at high prices.¹⁴ The paper cited al-Qasr al-Dhahabi at the al-Magidi Mall in Erbil, opened in early 2010, as displaying sets of gems sold at very high prices, which an average Kurd could not afford. Luqman Aziz, owner of al-Qasr al-Dhahabi told an *al-Sharq al-Awsat* reporter that he recently sold a set of gems for \$7 million.¹⁵ Aziz claimed that some of his customers were from Baghdad. He added that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was the source of his merchandize.

Shamal Aqravi wrote in *Reuters*, "The new luxuries of Iraq's northern Kurdish region seem a world apart from the dust and grit of Baghdad, where suicide bombers are an everyday fear, dirt-grey blast walls dominate a war-weary cityscape, hotels are shuttered, leisure confined to home and the city's own telepherique [cable cars and indoor skating arena] lies in ruin."¹⁶ The relative security, stability, and attractive free market laws created a safe and conducive environment for investment in diverse economic activities, including tourism and entertainment, in the region. Erbil was dotted with an array of restaurants and nightclubs, which were open until late night hours unlike in Baghdad.

The investment-friendly trade laws, including "a 10-year tax exemption and free land to business owners with rights to transfer profits outside the region," were the backbone of the new economic development philosophy, which opened the door to Turkish, Gulf States, European, and US investors.¹⁷ Instead of spending large sums of money on security contractors in Baghdad, many small- and medium-size businesses preferred the Kurdistan Region as their base and as a launching pad to the rest of Iraq. Contrary to the situation in Baghdad, Kurdistan enjoyed better supply of electricity and water. The KRG minister of trade and industry, Sinan Chalabi, told reporters that within the next two or three years they would meet local needs of electricity, and build two more bridges in order to accommodate the increased trade with neighboring states.¹⁸

Hassan Baqi Hassan Hawrami, chairman of the Sulaimaniya Chamber of Commerce, told reporters that some three thousand businessmen had democratically elected the 15 members of his organization, whom he described as well educated and versed in promoting and establishing business enterprises.¹⁹ Hassan stressed that they were in the process of promulgating a set of principles for practicing good business, getting rid of the

existing outmoded bureaucracy and red tape, establishing ties with foreign chambers of commerce, and enticing foreign investment to the province through conferences and holding and participating in trade fairs.²⁰

In an interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Fian Farouq, a Kurdish author and academician, noted that the public sector had in the past failed in Iraq to promote economic development in industrial and agricultural sectors and in providing public services.²¹ She emphasized centrally developed plans hindered economic and social development and contributed to misallocation of resources and corruption. The centrally controlled economy suppressed individual initiatives, increasing reliance on public employment opportunities. She noted that the KRG's role since 2003 had been to create an environment that would attract private investment and individual initiative.²²

KRG president Barzani visited the Arbil International Airport on May 18, 2010, to receive the UAE foreign trade minister Sheikha Lubna bint-Khalid al-Qassimi and her 54-member commercial and investment delegation, who had come to Kurdistan to seek investment opportunities. She told reporters, "We pay full attention to Kurdistan; we are here to deepen relations and to invest in the region."²³ She added that UAE investment companies had expanded trade and investment in the region during recent years.

A New International Airport

The director of the new Arbil airport, Stafford Clarry, announced on March 24, 2010, the full-flight trial operation of the airport. A Turkish commercial flight was the first to land in the New Arbil airport.²⁴ Clarry said that when the airport became fully operational, it would handle some 150 regular daily flights. He added,

Due to the rapidly growing business environment and constant increases in passenger and cargo traffic, the new airport was strongly needed for efficient air transport. For this reason, [Clarry said], the Kurdistan Regional Government and AIA [Arbil International Airport] have constructed and equipped an airport for the future with one of the world's longest runways to handle the largest and heaviest aircraft on the hottest days, and capacity to handle over three million passengers per year.²⁵

The new airport was built with a view to meeting the needs of growing tourism, expanding trade, increasing the region's accessibility to international investors, and supporting Kurdistan's growing economy. The airport was designed by the UK-based Scott Wilson Group and constructed

by a Turkish company, Mak-Yol Cengiz Joint Venture.²⁶ President Barzani and Turkey's prime minister Erdogan inaugurated the opening of the airport officially in early 2011.

Since the region was secure, many business companies felt it provided them easy access to the rest of Iraq and the outside world. The chairman of the Iraqi Businessmen's Union, Hirish al-Tayyar, told reporters in Arbil during June 2006, "Lebanese companies have been exploring the area's potential, but the bulk of the foreign businesses now in northern Iraq are from Turkey. One such company is the Turkish firm 77, which has invested a lot of money in cement batching plants."²⁷ The Lebanese Audi Bank, which invested heavily in infrastructure, and hired and trained local employees, sought a long-term base in the region. Charbel Mubarak, Audi's regional manager, told reporters, "We believe that this is the departure point, because our main target is Baghdad. While security is prevailing here in Kurdistan, we can stay here, we can start from here and then move to other parts of Iraq, waiting for other cities, whenever the security prevails we will go there."²⁸

Douglas Layton, the director of the Kurdistan Development Corporation, a joint public-private company, stressed the KRG revised policy for foreign investors now allows 100 percent ownership of local companies compared to 49 percent earlier, 5- to 10-year tax exemption and exemption from import duties, income taxes, and taxes on repatriated profits.²⁹ However, the education system and infrastructure of the region that would support large-scale commercial ventures still needed improvement and upgrading. These shortcomings were considered to be advantageous since everything had to be built from A to Z. Layton told reporters that "smart investors realize now is the time to be entering northern Iraq as the region is beginning to take off."³⁰

Critiques of Ongoing Development

Helene Sairany was critical of KRG's approach to development by stating, "In Kurdistan, it is about quantity and not quality, it is about symbol and not substance, it is about treating the symptoms and not the underlying cause of a chronic disease, and it is about wealth without work."³¹ She argued a university degree or having a positive attitude did not qualify an individual to occupy a certain government position that would require competence and experience. She claimed that she had observed how incompetent and unqualified individuals were often assigned to positions that would require maturity and experience and that the KRG was fascinated by new technology, ideas, and skills of foreign workers and

technicians, who received much more pay for similar tasks carried out by locals.

Sairany's remarks revealed the need for a slower pace of development by first focusing on local capacity building that would enable the people of Kurdistan to sustain the development process in the long run. Officials must be more realistic and avoid exaggerating the region's growth rate, and allow the local people to absorb the changes introduced in order to prevent an economic bubble that might burst in their face.

Much of the region's annual budget was used to pay the salaries of thousands of idle government employees who were appointed based on whom they knew in higher places than on their competence. Sairany raised many important questions about the suitability of the new technology introduced and teaching methods used at universities to deal with domestic social and economic problems.

In reference to some KRG officials' claims that they would turn Iraqi Kurdistan into Dubai, Parag Khanna, former election advisor to the US president Barack Obama and current director of the Global Governance Initiative, wrote, "Dubai is not a meaningful or sensible model for Kurdistan. Dubai's development has been real estate driven, not oil driven. Kurdistan seeks to maintain a politically stable climate for its own economic growth and consolidation of autonomy."³² In an effort to create a sustainable and self-reliant economy, the Kurds must diversify their economy in line with locally available agricultural, water, mineral, and human resources.

Promotional Campaigns

Some 850 businessmen from around the world participated in the sixth International Trade Fair held in Arbil on October 18–21, 2010. Some were promoting industrial products, others were seeking investment opportunities, and yet others wanted to use the Kurdistan Region as a launching pad to enter Iraqi markets in the center and south.³³ The participating companies in the fair displayed their products and services and sought partners and business opportunities on the fairground.³⁴ The participants had come from a number of European countries, including Germany, France, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Poland, Italy, and Austria.

Zdenk Cvrkai of Czech Republic told reporters that their products consisted of manufacturing equipment and machinery and they wanted to use Kurdistan to sell their products to clients in other parts of Iraq, which were not quite stable at present.³⁵ Peter Herman, sales manager at the Venti Oelde, a German manufacturer, opined there was great potential in Kurdistan and

Iraq for their products. While visiting the fair, President Barzani declared, "It is a pleasure to see how this event has evolved and expanded each year. The Kurdistan Regional Government has strongly supported foreign direct investment and the activity of the private sector, and I think what we see today is a reflection of the success of our policies."³⁶ Turkish and Iranian companies dominated the fair numerically. A banquet, organized and financed by the Kurdistan Business Group, an informal network of international and local firms, described the fair as being spectacular. A large German delegation traveled to the Sulaimaniya province and held consultations with its Chamber of Commerce in order to explore business opportunities.

Kurdistan had turned into a center for car sales for Iraqis, who in the past traveled to the Persian Gulf to purchase cars and electric appliances. Hakim Mohammed, a car dealer in Erbil, said that about 90 percent of his customers were Arabs from the center and south and that South Korean cars were Iraq's number one choice "because they are cheaper than German or U.S. cars and the quality is good."³⁷

Persian Gulf Investment

Through concerted KRG promotional advertisement in the Persian Gulf, many rich entrepreneurs became interested in investment in the Kurdistan Region. By December 20, 2009, it was estimated that the Gulf states had invested more than US\$6 billion in the region.³⁸ The president of the Investment Commission (IC0), Hirish Muharam, told reporters on February 19, 2010, that the size of foreign investment in the region had exceeded \$12 billion and more Arab investment was expected in the region.³⁹ Muharam, who accompanied Prime Minister Salih to the UAE during February 2010, stressed that UAE's political leaders and businessmen had received the KRG delegation enthusiastically and shown considerable interest in the Kurdistan for investment.⁴⁰ He added that Salih had explained to UAE officials Kurdistan's potential for tourism and petrochemical industries.⁴¹ Muharam announced that the US General Electric (GE) had signed an agreement with MAS International Investment amounting to \$200 million for providing services and equipment for building two projects for generating and distributing electricity in the region.

The UAE topped Kuwait, Lebanon, Turkey, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Egypt in investing in real estate, tourism, and trade. The increasing interest in the region was attributed to its recognized status as an autonomous region within Iraq, good security, strategic location between the Gulf and Europe, stability, potential for economic growth, and most of all its desirable mild climatic conditions for tourism.⁴² Some described the region as the "Other Iraq" or second Dubai.

UAE Sharja-based Dana Gas had been involved in developing the region's gas resources with the intention of exporting it via the Nabocco gas pipeline to Europe in an effort to create an alternative to Russian gas supply. Developing the region's oil and gas resources also attracted investment in the related petrochemical industry.⁴³ The UAE's interest in the Kurdish region was partly commercial and partly motivated by politics, that is, putting an Arab trademark on the region by naming one of the several luxurious hotels it was building in Sulaimaniya "Burj al-Arab" (Arab Tower), instead of using Kurdish names.

During a visit by Prime Minister Salih to Iran, the two sides agreed to wave visa requirement for their citizens to visit each other's territories with a view to promoting trade and development.⁴⁴ Iranian construction firms were doing brisk business in housing constructions and opening business centers in Sulaimaniya, Arbil, and Duhok. While their autonomous status enabled them to engage in direct trade and economic deals, the region's 17 percent of Iraq's oil revenue enabled them to build the region's infrastructure.⁴⁵

The 2010 Arbil International Fair attracted more companies than a similar one held a year earlier.⁴⁶ Turkey led other countries by 76 companies, followed by Iran with 53, Jordan 44, Germany 41, France 19, UAE 16, Austria 13, Czech Republic 11, United Kingdom 9, China 5, and the United States 2.⁴⁷ Turkey, with about 600 companies, was the largest investor by far in the region. Kurdistan had established close commercial ties with Europe via Turkey.

Kurdistan's free market economy, great potential for development, and generous business incentives attracted large numbers of European companies to the region. Kurdish officials were disappointed to see only two US companies participate in the fair. *The Washington Times* blamed the US government for discouraging US investors from going to Kurdistan, which they often described as risky for business as the rest of Iraq.⁴⁸ The paper reported, "[T]he most recent Iraq Travel Warning (Nov. 5), [2010] says that 'no region should be considered safe' and 'attacks against military and civilian targets throughout Iraq continue.'"⁴⁹ *The Times* also asked why the US State Department was loathe to mention Kurdistan while Turkey, with its long-standing dispute with the Kurds, mentions the word. Harry Schute, the writer of the article, asked why the United States was sending mixed messages about the security in Iraq's Kurdistan where no Westerner had been killed and the United States had not deployed more than 200 soldiers since 2004. Perhaps the United States tried to avoid creating political sensitivity and show that it keeps equal distance from Iraq's political factions with opposing agenda. Marathon and Hunt oil companies were among a very few American companies that benefited from investment opportunities in the region.

Arbil Turns into Major Shopping Center

Local investors started competing with foreign companies for a piece of the region's economic pie. A local entrepreneur, Ahmed Mala Qadir Majidy, started constructing the Majidy Mall in Arbil on 130,000 square meters at a cost of about \$105 million.⁵⁰ The mall contained shops for clothing, jewelry, banks, restaurants, and a large parking lot.

Arbil had turned into a major shopping center in the region and was selling everything from famous Kurdish dairy products to Swiss watches, Japanese electronics, and other luxury items to meet the fancy of the new, growing class of rich Kurds. The number of the European-style malls mushroomed in Arbil, Sulaimaniya, and Duhok over a period of two years.⁵¹ According to Mariwan Salihi, a Dubai-based journalist, "At last count, there are over a dozen malls, and in their wake have come many global brands venturing into Iraq for the first time. The French hypermarket chain was to open in Arbil before the end of this year [2010]."⁵²

Arbil, which was a small rural town in the early 1990s, had grown to a modern city of high rises with a population of about 2 million, including 200,000–300,000 expatriates, many of them making considerable contribution to the growing economy of the region. The Majidi Mall established by the Hewa Group in 2009 had drawn considerable attention during a short span of time.⁵³ Salihi said that the High Street favorite shopping centers were Ecco, Chopard, Diesel, Levi's, Mane Mall Tarin Hill, which were all foreign names that had been established in partnership with local investors.

Nicky Woolf, a *Guardian* reporter, wrote, "In Arbil, the capital of Kurdistan, minarets are now outnumbered two to one by cranes. New shopping malls, hotels, and blocks of flats are being built at an extraordinary rate. Kurds who fled the genocide in the late 1980s are now returning from Germany and the U.S. and bringing with them more cosmopolitan attitudes."⁵⁴ Arbil's wealthy district of Ainkawa was full of Chinese, Italian, and German cuisine, liquor stores, and entertainment places. The KRG was planning to diversify the region's economy from reliance on oil to tourism and services.⁵⁵

KRG information director, Hayder Mustafa, told reporters that "[c]urrently 24 Arab and other countries are investing in Kurdistan Region, numbering 260 companies. The total investment of foreign companies is \$12.5 billion in the fields of housing, agriculture, tourism and industry."⁵⁶ The French consul general in Arbil, Fredric Tissot, noted, "Kurdistan has security, Kurdistan has international airports, it has roads, it has good investment law, it has telephones and internet, and above all it has a good investment opportunity. But very few foreign investors know about all of these."⁵⁷ Tissot suggested that the KRG should be more active to provide

more information to foreign investors about investment opportunities in the region. Kurdistan became a lucrative market for Turkey's investors and contractors as well as consumer goods and farm products, which especially aided Turkey's Kurdish region.

Kurdistan Welcomes Iraq's Professionals

In addition to tourists, thousands of other Arabs and Christians escaped the daily threats of violence in the center, south, and Nineveh province and found safe haven in the Kurdish enclave. Over a million Arabs continued to live in the Kurdish region until the end of 2009. Extremist Sunni Arab nationalists with links to al-Qa'ida continued harassing Christian families in Baghdad and Mosul in order to force them out of their homes.

It was reported on December 17, 2009, that 48 Christians had been assassinated in Mosul and 1,000 families had escaped to the Kurdistan Region since 2005.⁵⁸ Ruel Dawood Jamil, secretary of the Chadian United Democratic Party, told reporters that the past and present destruction of Christian churches and kidnappings and assassination of the members of their community were meant to cleanse Mosul of its Kurdish, Shabak, Yazidi, and Christian populations. He put the blame on the administrators of Mosul and the central government for failing to protect the lives of minorities.⁵⁹

The presence of such a large number of Arab refugees over the initial six years of war made it politically difficult for the KRG to ask them to leave because the Kurdish region was officially part of Iraq. Since the Kurdish region suffered from the shortage of professionals, they welcomed Arab businessmen, university professors, schoolteachers, and doctors. Many of these people established businesses in the region, which they considered their home. Although KRG security officials screened the flow of the incoming refugees in order to prevent saboteurs from infiltrating the region, the continued presence of such large numbers of Arabs in the region, it was feared, might jeopardize the Kurdish dream of greater autonomy in a region called Kurdistan.

Rural-Urban Migration and Real Estate Market

The rapid economic transformation, subsidized food prices, and increased demand for real estate, led to the increased flow of rural-urban migration, decline in local farm production, and shortage of housing, water, and social services. *Ajans a Peyamner* wrote on October 23, 2010, that KRG was concerned about the devastating consequences of the ongoing

rampant rural-urban migration, which was endangering the food security of the Kurdistan Region. The paper said that since earlier policies had failed to stop or reverse the rural-urban migration, the KRG had adopted a new policy aimed at massive rural reconstruction that would entice farmers to remain on their land and encourage those in urban centers to return.⁶⁰

This program was supposed to reverse Saddam Hussein's scorched-earth policy of destroying over four thousand Kurdish villages and forcing their residents to reside in collective settlements along major highways during the Anfal campaign in 1988.⁶¹ Unwittingly, the government turned Kurdish farmers into consumers who increasingly became dependent on free/subsidized food handout, especially following the UN sanctions on Iraq's government for suppressing its people in 1990s. Kurdistan produced more than its own needs of grain until the 1960s and exported its surplus to other parts of Iraq and Europe.⁶² In 2010, Kurdistan was importing wheat from Australia, milk products from Turkey, and vegetables from Iran and Syria. During the 1980s and 1990s, most Kurdish livestock perished due to the Iraqi government's scorched-earth policy against Iraqi Kurds, who sought a degree of local autonomy.

Haidar Mustafa, KRG director general for investment, told *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that in addition to real estate loans, his government offered \$7,500 for building a decent house. He said that they have stopped offering loans for building houses in urban centers until they had covered the rural sector. He stated that new program had already promoted building homes on higher grounds and mountains with new specifications in rural Kurdistan.⁶³ He added that the emergence of new private farms [plastic green houses] had become a new model for farm production. He added that rich Kurds were purchasing large plots of farmland along major highways or in nearby villages, making many poor villagers wealthy overnight.

Instead of using their newly acquired land for agricultural production, many new farmland owners, with connections to senior KRG officials, used them for speculative purposes, inflating real estate values. Observers feared that the new rural reconstruction policy would feed into the ongoing frenzy of purchasing farmland by the new wealthy Kurdish class, not for the purpose of agricultural production, but rather for speculative or recreational purposes.

Many expatriate Kurds, who had returned from the United States and Europe, had developed a taste for weekend homes, and tried to exploit the new rural reconstruction policy of getting government grants to build vacation homes under the pretext of establishing greenhouse farming on a small plot of land. A certain Mohammed Hussein told *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that he purchased two Donums (1 Donum = 2,500 square meters) of farmland, about, for \$40,000 an acre and that he would build a small vacation

home on it and use the rest of it as an orchard. Another person by the name of Jalal Abdul Rahman, who had just returned from Europe, purchased 7 Donums near Arbil, which he wanted to develop into a residential and commercial center. The ongoing rush on farmland was not only fragmenting the already fragmented agricultural land but was diverting farmland into residential and commercial properties.

While some Kurds wanted to slow the flow of Arabs from the center and south into the Kurdish autonomous region, housing construction companies bragged that “some of the Arabs who have fled other parts of Iraq to seek refuge in Kurdistan make some of their best customers.”⁶⁴ Many wealthy Iraqi Arabs, who escaped the violence in the center and south, purchased homes in the Kurdish region for speculative purposes.

The Dream City project manager, Ibrahim Abdullah, told reporters that the high real estate price did not deter wealthy Arabs from purchasing some 25 percent of the units in his building complex.⁶⁵ When asked about the legality of selling houses to people from outside the region, Abdullah said, “We sell houses to anybody who wants to buy them, while the legal aspect is handled by the government.”⁶⁶

Since Shabak Kurds—a minority religious group—were legally deprived from purchasing land in Mosul and those Kurds expelled from their homes and farms were not allowed to purchase land in Arabized Kurdish areas, “the influx of Arab refugees to Kurdistan and their purchasing of property here have raised concerns among many Kurds,” according to *Rudaw*.⁶⁷ *Rudaw* reported that no Arab was supposed to be able to purchase houses in the Kurdish region without permission from the *Asayish* (security) organization. It also reported that some 37,889 Arab families had moved to the Kurdish autonomous region from 2003 to early 2011.

Adil Mutahida Group, a real estate developer, told reporters that they do not ask about the ethnic or sectarian identity of those who purchase their units and wealthy Arab physicians and engineers dominated some development projects such as the Dream City. While KRG claimed to be giving free land to real estate developers, “for housing projects in the hope of resolving the housing shortage,” it made no sense to sell such units to outsiders at a subsidized price.⁶⁸ Observers looked at the housing program in the Kurdish region as a big scam, which created opportunities for KRG officials to get huge kickbacks from real estate developers by offering them free access to public land.

The exorbitant prices offered by some wealthy Kurds and Arabs for farmland for building country homes sent increasing numbers of rural people to already crowded urban centers suffering from the shortage of sanitary drinking water, healthcare services, electricity, and proper sewage systems. Selling large swathes of public farmland to weekenders reduced

the acreage of farmland for food production. Many were turning agricultural land in distant locations in the valleys and mountains of Kurdistan into tourist areas, for which there was an increasing demand from Arabs of the center and south of Iraq as well from the Persian Gulf, who wanted to escape the hot summer temperatures, which often reached 50°C.

Consequences of Rapid Development

As the commercial business and tourism picked up in the region, the population of the provincial centers such as Arbil, Sulaimaniya, and Duhok more than quadrupled during 1991–2011. This was due to the return of expatriate Kurds, Arab refugees, migrant workers, and rural-urban migration. The imported subsidized food and food-aid distribution discouraged local production and dampened the price. Just like the Persian Gulf states, the region increasingly relied on food import from outside the region.

For these reasons, the KRG developed a new set of incentives in order to encourage farmers to return to their farms. The KRG started in earnest in 2009 to provide loans amounting to 60 percent of the value of agricultural machinery, US\$1,500 for purchasing ploughs, and \$10,000 for purchasing combines.⁶⁹ Abdul Hamid Abdullah, director general of the KRG Ministry of Agriculture, said that his ministry had paid the farmers 60 percent of the cost of transporting farmer produce to the market. He added that his ministry was promoting new irrigation methods in order to boost the per unit yield of wheat.⁷⁰

In the presence of abundant fertile agricultural land and irrigation water, the UAE planned to invest in the region's agricultural sector in order to produce food items demanded locally and in the Gulf region. Until a few years earlier many Kurdish families procured their own tomato paste the old fashioned way during the peak tomato season. A US-based private equity firm, Andrew Eberhart Marshall Fund, was now running a tomato-paste factory near Arbil.⁷¹ Eberhart, a former US Army officer and banker, who was planning to also enter the fast-food and dairy industries, noted, "The level of institutional interest in the U.S. and the U.K. is picking up. There's plenty of really good opportunities there right now."⁷² Despite the ongoing enthusiasm about food production, the waste resulting from industrialization and urbanization polluted irrigation and drinking waters and rendered good farmland unusable.

The rapid and expansive urbanization and construction in the countryside by political party cadres and rich families raised concerns about abusing nature and public land. *Hawlati* editor-in chief, Kamal Rauf, worried,

We are concerned that all the hills and heights of the country have been occupied and turned into party centers and headquarters. Most of the beautiful gardens and orchards of this country have been appropriated by party apparatchiks and officials. We are sad that party business and politics have replaced careers and professions and have taught many of our young people to become parasites, bereft of any productive ability and self-confidence. We are sad to see our children in three schools share one old derelict school building three times a day while the party headquarters and party officials' villas are renovated or built in the most modern style and have usurped the most prestigious locations of our city.⁷³

The outcome of a survey, conducted by the *Economist* and published on July 6, 2010, indicated that "areas of the Iraqi economy rated of greatest interest to foreign investors are construction and real estate, followed by consumer goods."⁷⁴ Jane Kinnimont, who had summarized the outcome of the survey, wrote, What I observed in cities like Erbil [Arbil] and Suleymaniye [Sulaimaniya] was an abundance of newly completed or in process construction projects—high rises, suburban housing developments, and hotels—with most uncertain prospects as to who was going to occupy all this new living space. This risk incurred by their local partners was mitigated by the limited (if any) tax obligations involved and the prospects of continuing revenue from the regional government's share of national oil revenues, which reached these Kurdish capitalists through whichever of the two major political parties they enjoyed affiliation.⁷⁵

The region's 17 percent share from Iraq's national oil revenue fueled the growing economy as well as consumers' markets in the region. The region became the dumping ground for imported consumer goods, especially from Turkey. Turkish export companies established partnerships with influential party officials who ensured the security of their representatives and facilitated access to local markets.⁷⁶

It appeared that foreign companies had only short-term interests in the region and avoided long-term risky propositions. The *Economist* report indicated that the KRG was not developing "a viable working class," but functioned as "the employer of last resort," placing "four men in an office, one to do the work, and three to watch him operate."⁷⁷ The report stated there was little investment in agriculture and a few farmers left on farmland and those who chased good fortunes in large cities end up doing menial and unproductive work. The report added that even if the region continues to enjoy a high oil price, the power would remain concentrated "at the center, with political authorities having an almost unlimited pool of largesse to keep the common man relatively content and to fund the apparatus of state repression."⁷⁸ The sudden downturn of oil price would lead to high unemployment and social turmoil.

Water Shortage

The demand for water increased exponentially in the span of a few years due to rapid urbanization, tourism, and the revitalization of the agricultural sector. In the face of drought during 2007 and 2008, many people in the outskirts of Sulaimaniya, Arbil, and Duhok started drilling for water in order to meet domestic, industrial, and agricultural needs. The increasing domestic consumption of water in Arbil awakened the regional government to the importance of constructing a large-scale water project.

Government officials claimed that the Ifraz water project, 60 percent of which was complete in 2009, was expected to meet the increasing needs of Arbil for water.⁷⁹ The US Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) financed the project, which had the capacity to provide 10,000 cubic meters of water per hour. Nihad Izzaddin, water engineer, told the *Kurdish Globe* that the project could meet Arbil's domestic needs of 6,000 cubic meters of water per day for the next 20 years. Izzaddin added that water meters were installed in order to control household water consumption. When the project completed, the regional water authority had planned to seal off all earlier water wells sunk in the capital. The water project, which is linked to the Kalak River, west of Arbil, still needed an additional \$50 million in order to be completed. The KRG was also able to secure more funds from Japan, through the central government, in order to complete this modern computerized water supply and purification system.⁸⁰ The Korean government had committed \$3.5 million to the second phase of the project.

Faced with the growing water shortage, deputy prime minister Azad Barwari laid the first brick for another water project in the district of Amidi in Duhok province, on February 19, 2010, by building a new dam.⁸¹ Barwari told local residents that while President Barzani was aware of the district's many needs, he was handicapped by the shortage of funds. He added that the new dam would help collect the waters of a number of streams and springs for the benefit of the local population. In cooperation with the Ministry of Municipality, the Swedish Qandil Organization was constructing "a modern water and sanitary treatment in the region," with a view to getting rid of the open sewer system in Arbil, which was a source of spreading mosquitoes and other diseases.⁸²

Tourism Industry

With its large potential for tourism, Kurdistan could compete with Lebanon and Syria for Iraqi as well as Gulf states' tourists, especially

during the summer season. Thousands of Arabs from the center and south had traveled to Kurdistan to escape the summer heat in 2011 but many could not find rooms in hotels and motels and ended up in private homes or camping on sidewalks. Arab and Kurdish families competed for the limited number of cabins in the Dukan resort town and elsewhere in the region. Sa'ad Jabar, head of a certain Arab family from the center, vacationing with his extended family members of 19 at Dukan, told a reporter that Kurdistan was "a paradise," compared to the rest of Iraq.⁸³ While some Kurds complained about the escalating cabin prices, resort owners said that Arabs were "the best source of income" for them.⁸⁴

In addition to the ruling parties, who initially built and managed resort facilities, the KRG attracted foreign tourist companies from Lebanon and the Persian Gulf to build and manage new hotels and upgrade the existing ones. Tourism created new employment opportunities for foreign but not local workers, who lacked the technical and managerial skills to run hotels and resort facilities. Since Kurdistan's university graduates did not have proper training in hotel management, tourist agents imported foreign workers.⁸⁵

In the face of the flourishing construction sector, the KRG organized a commercial exhibition for stone and ceramic production industries, attended by some 262 companies from 14 countries in January 2010.⁸⁶ About 200 of the participating firms in the exhibition were from Turkey. The move was intended to show the potential of the region for the procurement and marketing of stone and ceramic products.

Upon the arrival of a large Turkish commercial delegation to Arbil at the end of June 2010, a two-day conference was convened to shed light on investment opportunities in the region.⁸⁷ Prime Minister Salih and the Turkish state minister for foreign commercial affairs were keynote speakers at the conference. The Turkish minister shed light on the long Turkish-Kurdish relationship and current efforts aimed at consolidating such ties with the Kurdistan Region in several areas, including energy, agriculture, tourism, and banking, and mentioned that a branch of one of the largest Turkish bank would soon be opened in Arbil in order to facilitate commercial transactions between the two sides.⁸⁸

KRG Reassesses its Policy

In order to distance themselves from Arab Iraq, who had suppressed their rights for so many decades, most school students chose English as a second language instead of Arabic. However, they soon realized that it was unwise to shun Arabic, which was becoming an important tool for

conducting business and settling disputes with Arab political factions in the new Iraq, which the US occupation forces wanted to keep united. The KRG recruited the incoming qualified Arab teachers from the center and south in order to improve Kurdish students' Arabic-language proficiency, who were needed in the tourist and business sectors. The Kurdish region reintroduced Arabic as second and not first language to Kurdish schools. New Arabic teaching schools were also opened to meet the growing needs of Arab refugees from the center and south.

Ajans a Peyamner wrote an article entitled "Arbil Sabaqat al-Harb Wa Banat Linafsiha Hadhara Fi al-Salam" (Arbil left the war behind and built for itself a peaceful civilization).⁸⁹ The article compared the state of government institutions and public and private infrastructure in Baghdad to that in Arbil. It said that vehicles were waiting in long lines to enter Arbil, seeking medical treatment in the city's hospitals or wanting to spend holidays or visit relatives or seek employment. It added that the city had witnessed rapid expansion in terms of infrastructure, housing, hotels, malls, a new international airport, universities, public parks, well-stocked grocery shops, and nightclubs. Contrary to Baghdad, where destruction was overwhelming, Arbil enjoyed adequate electric supply and a pleasant and safe nightlife. However, a fire at the Soma Hotel in Sulaimaniya during the third week of August 2010, which took the lives of 30 people, including 14 foreigners, and injured more than 40, exposed the KRG to considerable criticisms about the way it had been enforcing safety rules in the construction of hotels by foreign companies, which tried to cut corners.⁹⁰ The outcome of investigations indicated that the fire was due to improper wiring of electric appliances.⁹¹ In the absence of clear construction codes, hundreds of Turkish, Lebanese, and Western construction companies, relying mostly on imported workers, hurriedly built high rises and residential complexes and left the region with bundles of cash.⁹²

Conclusion

KRG's approach to the transformation of Iraq's Kurdistan into a modern enclave similar to Abu Dhabi is misconceived, leading to a misallocation of resources, rapid rate of urbanization, corruption, lack of transparency, and high inflation. Compared to Abu Dhabi, Kurdistan is endowed not only with oil and gas, but also with rich farmland and an abundance of water and other natural resources. Kurdistan needs a more balanced approach to development, which would ensure a rational use of natural resources, accountability and transparency in the use of public fund, especially the oil revenue.

Chapter 5

Evolving Ties with the United States and Europe

Surrounded by deadly enemies in the Middle East, Kurdish politicians carefully navigated the US, European, and Middle Eastern political arena, demonstrating statesmanship, diplomatic skills, and reliability as peacemakers between Sunni and Shiite Arabs in order to maintain Iraq's unity. The Kurds were quick to acquire the necessary political and diplomatic skills to administer their autonomous region, consisting of Arbil, Sulaimaniya, and Duhok. The nascent Kurdish administration galvanized the Kurdish Diaspora who helped them establish bridges with Western states.

The young charismatic KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from Jefferson College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for his distinguished public service.¹ In his acceptance speech on May 17, 2008, Barzani stated,

We Kurds are committed to a democratic and federal Iraq—an Iraq at peace with itself and with its neighbors. Since 2003, we have built the Kurdistan Region as a model for democracy and tolerance. Our region is a gateway for economic development to all of Iraq. For the first time in nearly a century the people of the Kurdistan Region have genuine hope and a real chance for a peaceful and prosperous future.²

While talking to reporters, Barzani added that early US troop withdrawal from Iraq would be disastrous for Kurdistan and appealed to the United States for support, by saying, “Whatever is good for the United States is good for us.”³

Barzani met with US president George W. Bush and his national security advisor, Stephen Hadley on May 24, 2008.⁴ He expressed his

condolences to the families of those who had died during the war and thanked President Bush for US sacrifices to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein's repressive government. He apprised Bush of the political and security progress made in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Barzani also met with Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

The *Turkish Daily News* wrote on May 27, 2008, "The number two official of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq was received by top level U.S. officials, including President George W. Bush, in Washington last week, in the latest indication of an increasingly close relationship between the United States and its closest ally in war-torn Iraq."⁵ The paper alleged that the talks by Kurdish officials in Washington were concealed from media flashlight partly to avoid provoking Turkey's sensitivity. Bulent Aliriza, director of the Turkey Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, noted, "The United States has clearly upgraded its ties with Iraqi Kurds."⁶

Qubad Talabani, KRG representative in Washington, told reporters, "The reception the prime minister received across the U.S. government and the U.S. business community, and the messages of support we heard from our friends in Washington, show a sincere appreciation for the leadership of the Kurdistan Region."⁷ Barzani's visit climaxed with the creation of an American-Kurdish Caucus, led by US Congressmen Lincoln Davis of Tennessee (Democrat) and Joe Wilson of South Carolina (Republican) and by a trade mission to visit Kurdistan.⁸

US Policy Adjustment in 2007 and Iraqi Kurds

In the face of the evolving situation in Iraq, the United States readjusted its alliances with Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni Arab political factions in an effort to show that it was keeping equal distance from Iraq's three major communities. To this end, US officials put increasing pressure on the Kurds to make greater concessions to Sunni and Shiite Arabs and to Turkey on disputed Kurdish areas, *peshmarga* fighters, oil law, and federalism

While Washington initially opposed Turkey's hot pursuit of Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK) rebels across borders into Iraqi Kurdistan, fearing that might destabilize the only stable part of Iraq, the United States started providing Turkey with real-time intelligence in December 2007 on PKK targets on Qandil Mountain in order to keep Turkey off its back. Three Turkish air raids into Iraqi Kurdistan during December 16–26, 2007,

hitting 200 targets, created considerable anxiety and fear among Kurdish villagers along the border.

Since similar attacks had failed to eradicate the PKK in the past, Kurdish officials appealed to Turkey to settle its Kurdish conflict through dialogue and diplomacy, which Ankara rejected. Some 30,000 Turkish troops crossed into the Iraqi Kurdistan in 1995, and 35,000 in early 1997 and again in late 1997, but none of them subdued the PKK.⁹ Iraqi Kurdish officials feared the United States might forsake them in favor of its long-time NATO ally, Turkey, which tried to destabilize their region. Hillary Clinton, the wife of the former US president Bill Clinton, was the only American politician who promised during her 2008 presidential election to keep US troops in Iraqi Kurdistan to protect the Kurds from Turkey's future invasions.¹⁰

The US military and diplomatic corps often exploited the weak Kurdish position in order to maintain the delicate balance of power between Sunni and Shiite Arabs, who were at loggerheads. Despite measured military and diplomatic conduct of KRG officials, Washington was more concerned about the larger picture in Iraq and the Middle East than about the Kurds.

As the security situation reached a critical juncture in early 2008, US vice president Richard Cheney paid a surprise visit to Baghdad on March 17, 2008, two days ahead of the fifth anniversary of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He later flew to the Balad airbase, the largest US military base in Iraq, 45 miles north of Baghdad, where he and his wife spent the night listening to US generals describe the security situation on the frontline. Cheney told reporters, "All Americans can be certain that we intend to complete the mission so that another generation of Americans does not have to come back here and do it again."¹¹

On March 18, 2008, Cheney flew from Balad to the Arbil international airport, where President Barzani and his prime minister Nechirvan Barzani received him. Cheney said, "We are certainly counting on President Barzani's leadership to help us conclude a new strategic relationship between the United States and Iraq, and to pass crucial pieces of national legislation in the months ahead."¹² He also pressed the Kurds to cooperate with Shiite and Sunni Arab blocs in preparing and passing the oil law, which the United States considered a cornerstone for forging national reconciliation and enabling rehabilitation of Iraq's oil industry by Western companies.

While the Kurds badly needed external support to resolve their disputes with Arabs over disputed Kurdish land, oil exploration, and the status of the *peshmarga*, Vice President Cheney pressed the Kurds to help the United States pass the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) and the oil law, which he

described as central to reconciliation between Shiite and Sunni Arabs. On the contrary, the Kurds argued that the oil law had nothing to do with the dispute between Sunni and Shiite Arabs and that the United States' main concern lay in facilitating the entry of Western oil companies to Iraq's oil fields. The Kurds noted that the constitution had already established benchmarks for oil exploration and management.

President Barzani's 2008 Visit to Washington

Upon an official invitation, President Barzani paid a visit to Washington on October 28, 2008, during which he held meetings with the US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, and discussed SOFA, which the United States wanted to sign in advance of troop withdrawal from city centers.¹³ Although Barzani had closely followed up drafting the agreement, he avoided divulging information about its contents. As a way to expedite finalization of the document, Washington warned Iraqis that without an agreement or an extension of the UN mandate, the United States would be obliged to freeze all combat operations, the provision of services, funding infrastructure projects, and assistance to the Iraqi government.

Ali al-Dabbagh, government spokesperson, noted that the Iraqi cabinet had revised the draft agreement and asked al-Maliki to deliver it to US negotiators for their consideration. Although the United States had warned against further alterations of the document, the White House spokeswoman Dina Perino said, "It will just be a very high bar for them to clear for us to change anything," in the agreement.¹⁴ Perino also said that while the United States had made the best possible offer to Iraq, it would consider working with Iraqi officials to revise the document. US officials opposed Iraq's demand to restrict US troops' immunity off US bases after withdrawing from city centers. While aware of not being able to maintain internal security, Iraqi officials played hardball in order to project themselves as strong Arab nationalists who despised foreign occupation.

In self-interest, the Kurds supported the American version of the deal, which left the door open for US troop presence in Iraq indefinitely. However, Arab nationalists tried to make sure that the United States would withdraw all its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. Barzani told reporters in Washington,

Most political factions in Iraq want the accord to go through. But he said the country is in a situation of intellectual terrorism, where people are not able to state their real positions, for fear of appearing too close to the United

States and of undercutting their standing in provincial elections scheduled for January 2009. Personally, I am doubtful it will pass.¹⁵

While President Bush said, "I remain very hopeful and confident that the SOFA will get passed," Sean McCormack, State Department spokesperson, added, "The bar to any revisions is very high."¹⁶ The KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, later told reporters that one reason for the delay in signing the deal was for the Iraqi government to extract more concessions from the United States and the other was to show the neighboring states that the government was not buckling under US pressure.¹⁷

President Bush warmly welcomed President Barzani at the White House on October 29, 2008, and told him, "It's been a while since we have seen each other, but we have talked on the telephone quite frequently—and the reason why is because you've played a very instrumental part in the development of a free Iraq. And I thank you for your leadership, and. I thank you for your personal friendship."¹⁸ Furthermore, Bush told reporters that they had discussed a number of issues, including the oil law, elections, and the SOFA. He expressed his appreciation for Barzani's strong advocacy for the SOFA and acknowledged he had received an amended version of the agreement, which was currently under review. He added that the United States would be helpful and constructive without undermining the underlying principles and was hopeful the deal would pass.

On his part, Barzani thanked President Bush and told him that he was pleased to have another opportunity to meet with him:

I am here to convey the gratitude of the Iraqi people in general and the people of Kurdistan, in particular, for the brave decision that you've made to rid us of this dictatorship. We are very grateful for all the brave souls, women and men in uniform, who gave their dear lives in the process. And we are very grateful to the American people and to you, Mr. President, for this sacrifice. And despite the fact that there remain some major problems, we have to look at all the big achievements that have been made so far. Let's look at the elections and the constitution that has been ratified. And we are determined to solve all the problems that still exist, according to the constitution.¹⁹

Barzani added that the SOFA was one of the major achievements that would serve Iraqi and American interests. While in Washington, Barzani also met with Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Rice, and National Security Advisor Steven Hadley.

A reception arranged by Barzani at the Carlton Ritz Hotel in Washington was attended by Zalmay Khalilzad, American UN representative and former ambassador to Iraq; Paul Bremer, former US administrator in Iraq; Peter Galbraith, former US ambassador to Croatia; Frank Ricardoni, former

desk officer for Iraqi opposition, before the 2003 war; Scooter Libby, Vice President Richard Cheney's chief of staff; Paul Wolfowitz, former deputy defense secretary; and a number of other senior US officials.²⁰ Barzani thanked all those who had accepted his invitation and said it was a good opportunity for him to meet friends who had helped Iraqi people before and after the downfall of dictatorship in order to build the new democratic and federal Iraq. He claimed that KRG had tried from the outset not to become part of Iraq's problems but part of a solution. On behalf of the Kurdish people, he expressed his deep appreciation for American sacrifices to liberate Iraqi people from dictatorship. Barzani's visit to Washington was to bid farewell to President Bush just before the end of his second term in the White House.²¹

US Ambassador Crocker Bids Farewell to Barzani

Following the transfer of power from President George W. Bush to President Barack Hussein Obama on January 20, 2009, Ambassador Ryan Crocker and some of his senior staff paid a farewell visit to KRG president Barzani on January 26, 2009, in Salahadin, Kurdistan.²² Crocker thanked Barzani for his help during his 2007–2008 assignment in Iraq and acknowledged the great sacrifices made by the Kurds for the freedom they enjoyed and said that the Iraqi constitution and their strong relationship with Washington would protect their freedom and ensure that past atrocities against them would not be repeated. He added that Americans understood the fears of the Kurds, which was based on pains they had endured in the past.

In an interview with an *al-Sharq al-Awsat* reporter on January 28, 2009, Crocker "singled out the resolution of disputed lands and their boundaries as a major challenge for Iraqi politicians to handle amicably."²³ Barzani appreciated Crocker's efforts to bring the United States and the Kurdistan Region closer together and described him as a close friend and a friend of the Kurdish people, hoping that the friendship would grow stronger.²⁴ However, Barzani told Crocker that the sacrifices made by the Kurds had far exceeded their gains during the war and that they would continue working for a federal democratic Iraq, defend Iraq's constitution, and prevent those who try to bring back dictatorship.²⁵ In response to Barzani's congratulatory message, the newly elected president Obama said that he looked forward to working with him during the coming four years and building strong bilateral relationships among the United States, Iraq, and the Kurdish region.²⁶

The Kurds often faced the problem of trying to understand the intricacies of American officials' cross-purpose talks and political maneuvers. The US military and diplomatic corps maintained working relationship with the Kurds in order to maximize their own national interests and had no patience to hear the Kurds airing their grievances. The Kurds had to behave like good soldiers and cooperate with US military and diplomatic corps, hoping that they would reciprocate their good behavior with political and diplomatic rewards. However, US officials often bartered Kurdish interests in Arabized Kurdish territories in order to appease Sunni Arab insurgents, who targeted and killed thousands of US troops during Iraq's bloody civil war.

The SOFA was passed on November 16, 2008, by a vote of 27 in favor to 1 against in the Iraqi cabinet.²⁷ Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari and US ambassador Ryan Crocker inked the document on November 18, 2008, and sent it to the parliament for approval.²⁸ According to the agreement, the US troops would remain in Iraq for three years (January 1, 2009–December 31, 2011), in order to train Iraqi forces and help them carry out daily operations as needed. The US troop combat role was to terminate at the end of August 2010 and the remaining US troops were to be withdrawn from Iraq at the end of 2011. The Sunni Arab political factions agreed to support the SOFA only after the Shiite-dominated government released all Sunni Arab prisoners in American and government custody, repealed the de-Ba'athification law, scrapped the Higher Criminal Court created to try Saddam Hussein's high-level government officials, and agreed to hold a referendum on the agreement in 2009.²⁹

US defense secretary Robert Gates, who had planned to retire during 2011, traveled to Baghdad on a two-day visit on April 7, 2011, and held meetings with Prime Minister al-Maliki and other Iraqi and US officials to review the security situation in the country and to offer Iraq the opportunity of extending US troop presence in Iraq.³⁰ Al-Maliki declined it because of opposition from one of his close allies, Muqtada al-Sadr. Salah al-Obaidi, al-Sadr spokesperson, told a crowd in Baghdad that Sadrists will escalate military resistance and reactivate the Mahdi Army if US troops were not withdrawn as planned.³¹ A Kurdish lawmaker, Mahmoud Othman, told reporters that Gates was pressing Baghdad to ask for the extension of US troop presence in Iraq.³² While Gates was saying that Iraq was able to meet future security challenges, he nevertheless wanted US troops to remain in Iraq, possibly as part of the US strategic force in the Middle East.

Following consultations with Iraqi officials in Baghdad, Gates, accompanied by the US ambassador James Jeffrey, and General Lloyd Austin traveled to Arbil to meet with Kurdish officials on April 8, 2011. Gates praised the role of Barzani in breaking the political stalemate

following the March 7, 2010, elections and helping to form the new government in Baghdad.³³ Gates told Barzani that the United States looked at Kurdistan as a friend. While expressing his people's appreciation for getting rid of Saddam Hussein, Barzani told Gates that the KRG would honor its agreements with Baghdad and called for addressing the pending disputes between Arbil and Baghdad in the context of the Iraqi constitution.³⁴

US Officials' Visits to the Kurdistan Region

During his third two-day visit to Iraq, Vice President Joseph Biden traveled from Baghdad to Arbil on September 18, 2009, in order to meet with Talabani and Barzani.³⁵ He was unable to travel from Baghdad to Arbil during his second visit to Iraq due to heavy sandstorms. Fu'ad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, and Falah Mustafa, the KRG's foreign relations director, received Biden at the Arbil International airport and accompanied him to Barzani's office in Salahadin in the outskirts of Arbil.³⁶

After thanking Barzani for his hospitality, at a joint news conference, Biden noted, "I seem to bring bad weather to Arbil. When I was to meet with you last, there was a severe sandstorm and we had to postpone the meeting. As the President knows, I very much wanted to return to Arbil. I had the pleasure of being here some time ago, and it is an honor to be back."³⁷ He said that President Barzani had told him a number of problems were awaiting the new regional cabinet to settle with Baghdad and that these problems could be resolved only by applying "the constitution and through good-faith negotiations. He [Barzani] knows, and we all know, these are difficult issues. If they weren't, they would have been resolved a long time ago."³⁸ Biden added that he was impressed by Barzani's willingness and commitment to negotiate in good faith with Iraqi officials in Baghdad.

Following Biden's visit, the US defense secretary Robert Gates paid a visit to Barzani on December 11, 2009.³⁹ Gates opined that Arab and Kurdish leaders were moving closer to settle their differences and suggested that the next election in Iraq should lead to a government that included different components of the Iraqi people.⁴⁰ Before traveling to Arbil, Gates had visited the US military base near Kirkuk and met with General Turhan Abdulrahman, a Turkman, in order to review the security situation there.⁴¹

Gates told reporters that the conflict between Arabs and Kurds in Kirkuk was a major concern in Iraq and in Washington, fearing it might

become a source of another war, but recent movements indicated the two sides wanted to solve the problem.⁴²

Practically all US officials tried to brush aside the festering Kurdish grievances with Baghdad over disputed Kurdish land, oil law, and *pesh-marga*, which the Kurds brought up on every occasion.

On August 25, 2010, the new US ambassador James F Jeffrey, who replaced Christopher Hill, paid a courtesy visit to President Barzani at his office in Salahadin.⁴³ The ambassador praised the KRG for its achievements in developing the Kurdistan Region within a short span of time and thanked Barzani for his constructive role in rebuilding Iraq's political structure. Barzani wished Jeffrey success in his new assignment and expressed hope that the US troop withdrawal from Iraq would not mean the end of US commitment to Iraq.⁴⁴

Impact of Troop Withdrawal from City Centers on Disputed Areas

The political stalemate following the March 7, 2010, elections and terrorist attacks on Iraq's military bases and checkpoints after the US combat troop withdrawal from city centers increased the KRG's anxiety. In order to establish a working relationship with the KRG, Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, accompanied by Ambassador James Jeffrey, visited President Barzani on September 8, 2010.⁴⁵ The KRG interior minister Karim Sinjari, General Omar Othman, and a number of other US and Kurdish officials joined the discussion in view of its military and diplomatic significance. Both Austin and Jeffrey were new in their posts and wanted to establish rapport with KRG officials. Barzani welcomed his guests and promised to cooperate and support their missions in Iraq. He expressed appreciation for US sacrifices to free the Kurds from terrorism and dictatorship. On their part, both Austin and Jeffrey expressed US support for the political and democratic processes in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.⁴⁶ The expression "Kurdistan Region" became a common phrase used not only by the Kurds but also by their guests.

Barzani's 2009 Travels to Washington

President Barzani returned to Washington on April 7, 2009, in order to meet with President Obama and apprise him of the security and political

situation in Iraq and the KRG's anxiety about its uncertain future.⁴⁷ Barzani expressed appreciation for Obama's earlier visit, as a presidential candidate, to Iraq and for support received from General Raymond Odierno, US troop commander in Iraq. He told President Obama that the next Iraqi government should include Iraq's major political factions and power shared equitably and democratically.⁴⁸ Barzani complained that some Iraqi politicians tried to marginalize the Kurds by hindering resolution of pending disputes between Arbil and Baghdad in advance of US troop withdrawal from Iraq. While saying that he was aware of the history of the Kurds and their achievements, Obama expressed appreciation for KRG's close cooperation with Turkey.⁴⁹ He stressed the importance of Iraq's unity and constitution and that Barzani should believe in the same concept. He added that the United States will continue supporting the Iraqi people and assured Barzani of the US support for the KRG.⁵⁰ While Kurdish officials were wary of the US policy, which had been noncommittal in the past, Obama's main concern was Iraq's unity and Turkey's security concerns.

While Barzani was visiting Washington, Iraq's national security minister, Shirwan al-Wa'ili, told reporters that Iraq, Turkey, and the United States had "formed a special committee to examine how best to rein in terrorist organization PKK."⁵¹ He said the purpose of forming such a committee was to exchange information about ways to stop the political, military, and media activities of the PKK in Iraq and "[o]ur forces have the authority and the power to close the (PKK) bases."⁵² He also said, "Our fight against terrorism is not limited only to al-Qa'ida, but is against all those who endanger the security of Iraq and disturb our relations with neighboring countries."⁵³ Pundits interpreted al-Wa'ili's statement against the PKK as a veiled warning to the KRG and its Kurdish *peshmarga* fighters in disputed Kurdish territories.

Massoud Barzani's 2010 Visit to Washington

In the face of the growing concern over the post-US troop withdrawal era, Kurdish officials wanted to follow up on their earlier contacts with US officials, who had not gone beyond promising that they would support the Kurds as long as Kurds respected Iraq's unity and Turkey's security concerns. The US ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, accompanied by Alan Misenheimer, senior advisor, and other embassy staff, traveled to Arbil on January 20, 2010, to meet with the KRG president Barzani and listen to his concerns.⁵⁴ The two sides also spoke about preparations for a possible

visit by Barzani to the White House in order to confer with President Obama and his senior staff about their anxiety concerning relationships between Arbil and Baghdad. When reporters asked Hill about the purpose of his travel to Arbil, he said, "I don't carry any message, and I'm not making an attempt to press the Kurds," to make concessions on the pending disputes, which should be solved according to a mentality that belongs to the 21st century, not the 19th."⁵⁵ He added that the relationship between the United States and Kurds was good, strategic, and based on mutual interests to build democracy in the region: he had come to Arbil to offer help to solve pending disputes between Arbil and Baghdad.⁵⁶ In reference to the implementation of Article 140 concerning land dispute, the ambassador noted his embassy was ready to provide advisory services to both sides in order to resolve the pending issues amicably.⁵⁷ However, observers noted that the US role in settling disputes between Arbil and Baghdad had been minimal and often negative when it came to addressing the issue of the disputed territories and of internally displaced Kurds.

Fu'ad Hussein announced on January 22, 2010, two days after Ambassador Hill's visit to Arbil, that President Barzani would go to Washington to meet President Obama, Vice President Biden, and members of the US Congress in order to brief them about preparatory arrangements for March 2010 elections, Kurdish grievances, and US-Iraq relationships.⁵⁸ Hussein also said Barzani would explore the possibility of a US role in "handling suspended issues [disputes] between KRG and federal government."⁵⁹

Barzani traveled to Washington on January 24, 2010, amid rising tension between Sunni and Shiite political factions resulting from the banning of some 500 candidates and 15 political entities, mostly Sunni Arabs, from the March 7, 2010, elections.

Michael Groin, deputy assistant secretary of state, and Samir al-Sumaidi, Iraqi ambassador and KRG representative in Washington, received Barzani at the Reagan International Airport.⁶⁰ Fu'ad Hussein, Nechirvan Barzani, Masroor Barzani, Ashti Hawrami, and Falah Mustafa accompanied President Barzani to Washington.⁶¹

Obama welcomed Barzani and his delegation to the White House on January 25, 2010, and "reaffirmed strong U.S. support for and engagement with a secure, prosperous, and autonomous Kurdistan Region within a united, federal Iraq," and lauded KRG's contribution to Iraq's development.⁶² Obama "extended U.S. good offices to help Iraqis move forward in forging a broad political consensus to resolve outstanding disagreements between the Kurdistan Regional Government [KRG] and the Government of Iraq, in accordance with the Iraqi constitution and working closely with the United Nations in these efforts."⁶³ Barzani underlined the importance

of the March 7, 2010, elections and KRG's commitment to a federal, democratic, and pluralistic government and constitution.⁶⁴ He stressed the significance of "long-term U.S. engagement with Iraq and the Kurdistan Region," and "the need for Iraq's constitution to be the arbitrator of internal disputes."⁶⁵ Kurdish officials feared that after settling their differences, Sunni and Shiite Arabs would embark on changing the constitution in a manner that would strengthen Iraq's Arab identity by centralizing the government and weakening the Kurdish autonomous region.

During his audience with Obama, Barzani praised Vice President Biden for shedding light on the importance of resolving the pending disputes between Arbil and Baghdad and expressed KRG's commitment to "building a secure, constitutional and prosperous Iraq."⁶⁶ In exchange for making concessions to Sunni Arabs while articulating the election law for the March 7, 2010, elections, the White House issued a statement supporting not only the implementation of Article 140, but also Article 142, which called for revising the constitution.⁶⁷ The White House support for implementing Article 142 was disappointing to the Kurds since it would give Arab political factions the power to strengthen the central government and erode the KRG's power base.

Barzani met separately with Biden, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. He delivered a lecture at the Brookings Institutions in Washington, explaining the importance of the March 2010 elections and the need for addressing pending KRG-government disputes. At a working session with her staff at the State Department and in advance of meeting with Barzani on January 26, 2010, Clinton called on the "leaders of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region to settle disputes over boundaries [of disputed areas] and oil revenues with Baghdad and to support Iraq's March 7 [2010] elections."⁶⁸ She noted, "We do expect that the Kurdish leadership will take an important role in trying to stabilize Iraq, trying to work with the Sunni and Shia [Shiite] leadership for the betterment of the entire country."⁶⁹ At a joint news conference, while appreciating Clinton's warm welcome, Barzani said, "I would like also to assure you, Madame Secretary, that we are committed to a federal democratic Iraq,"⁷⁰ implying there should be reciprocity in the political process. Clinton tried to show that she was tough and made no effort to address Barzani's anxiety about possible Arab nationalists' drive to undermine KRG's political and economic gains.

Clinton seemed to be more interested in finalizing Iraq's oil law, which would open the door to Western oil companies, than in the future status of the Kurdistan autonomous region. The somber expression and the rigid posture of both Clinton and Barzani at a brief joint news conference were indicative that the meeting between the two leaders had been one sided,

with the United States telling the Kurds that they had no choice but to observe the US policy guidelines in Iraq.

In commenting on Barzani's visit to Washington, Geoff Morrel, Pentagon spokesman, told reporters that Barzani had met with the US secretary of defense Robert Gates three times during the past seven months. He added that Gates had reaffirmed US support for KRG's security and prosperity within a united and stable Iraq and made a commitment to help solve the outstanding disputes between the KRG and Baghdad over the geographic boundaries of the Kurdish autonomous region and the rest of Iraq and the sharing of oil reserves.⁷¹ However, despite all these promises, KRG's grievances remained unresolved in May 2012.

Barzani returned to Kurdistan almost empty handed on February 7, 2010, after spending nearly a week in Washington, meeting US senior officials.⁷² Barzani, who left Arbil on January 22, spent the rest of his time abroad delivering speeches and visiting a number of European states, explaining the political and security situation in Iraq and expressing KRG's concerns about possible future events in Iraq. Upon return to Kurdistan, Barzani briefed the regional parliament, KRG officials, and Kurdish party officials about the outcome of his tours in the United States and Europe.⁷³

In face of continued political discord in Iraq, Vice President Biden paid a three-day visit to Iraq during July 2–5, 2010, and warned Iraq's political factions over the danger of further delay in forming the next government.⁷⁴ The neighboring states became so edgy that each country allowed its media to campaign in favor of this side or that side, raising tension throughout the region.

US Open Consulate in Arbil

As a way to gain greater political recognition in the international arena, Kurdish officials had long pressed Washington to open a Consulate General in Arbil in par with a number of other European states. The US assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, visited President Barzani in Arbil on May 19, 2010, and praised him for having established peace and stability in the region and pressing Iraq's political factions to expedite forming a new coalition government in Baghdad following the March 7, 2010, elections.⁷⁵

The US Congress approved decision number 873 to open a consulate in Arbil only on May 21, 2010.⁷⁶ While a number of other European countries had already established consulates and trade centers in Arbil, the

United States avoided doing so earlier for political expediency, mainly to avoid provoking Arab and Turkish sensitivity. The US decision came only following the news that Ankara was opening a consulate in Arbil and after months of concerted diplomatic efforts by the KRG. The KRG spokesperson, Kawa Mahmoud, welcomed the US Congress decision, which he claimed would strengthen the US-KRG ties.⁷⁷ Mahmoud stressed that some 20 countries had already established diplomatic ties with the KRG at different levels, including honorary consulates as in the case of Japan; office for diplomatic representation as in the case of Britain; and formal diplomatic consulates as in the case of Russia, Iran, and France.⁷⁸

The establishment of the US consulate in Arbil was an important sign that the United States was upgrading its diplomatic ties with the KRG and opening the door to US travelers to visit and invest in the region.⁷⁹ Jeffrey Feltman told reporters that the United States had close and strong relationship with the Kurdish region, noting the United States had helped Kurds during hard times and that the US support will continue.⁸⁰ In an effort to please the Kurds, Feltman claimed the United States supported the Iraqi constitution, which he said was a good document because the overwhelming majority of the Iraqis approved it.⁸¹ While welcoming the US decision, Mahmoud Othman, independent Kurdish lawmaker, said he hoped the US Consulate in Arbil would not work against Kurdish interests as it was doing in Kirkuk and called for a friendly and close relationship between the United States and the Kurds.⁸²

These were strong words of support coming from members of the US Congress and administration, who had until 2010 chosen their words carefully and kept their distance from the KRG in order not to provoke political sensitivity among Iraqi Arabs and Turkish politicians. The US action appeared as if it was synchronized with Turkey's changing stance on the Kurdish issue.

Falah Mustafa, director of KRG's Foreign relations Office, told reporters on June 3, 2010, that Kurdistan's open-door policy, international airline connections, mild climatic conditions, and great business opportunities had attracted increasing numbers of foreign consulates, diplomatic representation, trade centers, investors, construction companies, and European and Arab diplomatic and private delegations to the region.⁸³

Barzani Visits Ankara and Europe

The Turkish government, which had shunned the KRG leadership in northern Iraq since 2002, extended an official invitation to President Barzani in

early 2010 to visit Ankara, which he eagerly accepted. Pundits described Barzani's visit of June 2–7, 2010, to Ankara as historic and spectacular in that it reflected a dramatic shift in Ankara's policy toward the Kurds and their national identity. Turkey suddenly decriminalized the words of Kurd and Kurdistan and recognized the ethnic identity of the Kurds, with broad implication for the political status of about 15–20 million Kurds of its own Kurdish population. Turkish president Abdullah Gul and prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accorded President Barzani a reception reserved for heads of states.⁸⁴

Following the conclusion of his trip to Turkey, Barzani and his delegation traveled to Germany, where he met with leaders of the Christian Democratic Party, Christian Social Party, and the head and members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the German Parliament, including those who had visited the Kurdistan Region a month earlier.⁸⁵ During his meetings, Barzani repeatedly highlighted Kurdish grievances and struggles and shed light on the stability of the Kurdish region, which he said had attracted large numbers of foreign investors.

Barzani met with Guido Westerwelle, German foreign minister, at his office in Berlin and discussed modalities for strengthening commercial and political ties between KRG and Germany.⁸⁶ The German foreign minister described Barzani's visit to Ankara as an important step for achieving neighborly ties with Turkey and strengthening regional stability. He highlighted Germany's good relationship with the KRG and announced that a delegation would soon visit Arbil in order to open a German commercial center. He introduced Barzani to the soon-to-be German consul general in Arbil. Westerwelle noted direct flights between Germany and Arbil had already begun and a new German school would soon be opened in the city. He complimented the KRG for the security and stability of the Kurdish region and the protection accorded to Christian families fleeing volatile parts of Iraq to Kurdistan.⁸⁷

Barzani traveled from Germany to France and met with President Nicholas Sarkozy at the Elysee Palace and signed a memorandum of understanding for promoting technical cooperation, cultural exchange, science and technology, student exchanges, and economic and agricultural development between the Kurdistan Region and France.⁸⁸ Barzani signed the memorandum on behalf of the KRG and Bernard Kouchner, France's foreign minister, signed it on behalf of his country. The document paid special attention to technical cooperation in the field of agricultural development, including animal husbandry, poultry, and transfer of technology.⁸⁹ At a joint news conference, Kouchner said Barzani had been his friend for about 20 years, taking him back to the days when he worked as a humanitarian officer in the Safe Haven Zone in the Kurdistan Region,

created and protected by Western allies in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War.⁹⁰ Since he had become France's foreign minister, Kouchner helped in opening the French Consulate General and a cultural center in Arbil.

Barzani also met the speaker of the French parliament and joined a working luncheon attended by the French ambassador to Baghdad, Iraqi ambassador to Paris (Fareed Yasin), KRG minister of agriculture and water resources, and other government officials.⁹¹ Pundits described Barzani's reception in Paris as out of the ordinary and reserved for foreign heads of states.

During a news conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Paris, Barzani was asked if the Kurds would rescind their claim to the presidency in the new government in Baghdad, which he answered negatively by stating that under no circumstances would the Kurds give up the post of the presidency in favor of Sunni Arabs in the next Iraqi government. He insisted on Jalal Talabani's reelection to a second term, claiming that he had rendered invaluable services to the country during his first term.⁹² When asked about Iranian influence in Iraq, Barzani said it was not only Iran but also other neighboring states who had meddled in Iraq's internal affairs, and that they should keep out of Iraq's politics.⁹³

After three weeks of extended travel in Turkey and European capitals, Barzani returned to Arbil on June 24, 2010, and held a news conference at the Arbil International Airport. He told reporters that Turkey and European states had opened their doors wide to the KRG, especially in commercial and economic spheres.⁹⁴ He noted that there was a new environment and opening in Turkey's policy toward the Kurds. It was regrettable, he said, that PKK had renewed attacks on Turkish targets while he was visiting Ankara. He argued that force would not serve Kurdish interests and hoped that renewed clashes would not influence Turkey's new democratic initiative.⁹⁵ He told reporters that his delegation and Turkish officials had reached mutual agreements to expand economic and commercial ties between the two sides and that he was committed to supporting Turkey's peaceful initiative toward the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

The French Council General in Arbil told reporters that the Kurdish flag was raised alongside Iraqi, French, and European flags during Barzani's visit to Paris, as a clear symbol and open recognition of the KRG as a constitutional federal entity.⁹⁶ He added that the meeting between Barzani and Sarkozy at the Elysee Palace was not only diplomatic in nature but also reflected close friendly ties between the two leaders.

As for his visit to Germany, although Barzani mentioned it was not official, he attended a meeting organized to establish a Kurdish-German friendship committee in the German parliament. Barzani spent two days in Sweden, during which he met President Fischer and congratulated him

for winning the latest elections, and described him as a close friend. In an effort to strengthen its diplomatic presence in Europe, the KRG appointed Salim Krafi as its representative in Brussels on October 7, 2010, to promote Kurdish interests in the European Union.⁹⁷

Barzani Visits Rome

In the context of his official visit to Italy on October 2, 2010, President Barzani opened a KRG representation office in Rome and discussed ways and means to strengthen economic and commercial ties with Italy.⁹⁸ While in Rome, Barzani visited the Italian parliament, held discussions with the speaker, spoke about progress made in Kurdistan and of causes of the political stalemate in Iraq following the March 7, 2010, elections. The speaker of the Italian parliament and his colleagues expressed support for the KRG in all spheres of activities.⁹⁹ Barzani met with the Italian minister of trade, who informed him that his country was closely following events in the Kurdish region and looked forward to developing closer economic and commercial ties between the two sides. As for Barzani, he shed light on the political situation in Iraq and impediments hindering formation of a new government following the March elections. Barzani claimed that the peace and security enjoyed by the Kurdish region had opened up the door to foreign investors and that he would like to see more Italian investors and businessmen participate in the reconstruction of the region.¹⁰⁰

The Italian minister of foreign affairs, Franco Fratinni, told reporters that Italy was contemplating opening a consulate in Arbil and said, "I had a very constructive meeting with President Barzani," and shared his view that Iraq needs an inclusive government, "which represents all ethnic and religious communities in Iraq."¹⁰¹ He added that Italy valued the Kurdish role in the political process of Iraq and had assured President Barzani of Italy's support for Iraq and the Kurdistan Region and would work to "open an Italian consulate in Kurdistan as soon as possible . . . encourage Italian companies and businesses to seek investment opportunities in the Kurdistan Region."¹⁰² In response to reporters' questions, Barzani thanked Fratinni for his warm reception and encouraging remarks and said, "I am pleased to see that Italy is very interested and willing to support Iraq and the Kurdistan Region in particular. Italy is an important country and a major member state of the European Union."¹⁰³

Barzani returned to Rome in February 2011 to receive the "Atlantic Award," from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Parliamentary Assembly (PA), in recognition of his constructive engagement in Iraq's

politics and efforts to shelter and protect Christian families escaping violence from other parts of Iraq.¹⁰⁴ While receiving the award, Barzani underlined that “the Kurds believed in exercising the right to self-determination to create an independent state of their own” as the people of Southern Sudan did recently. He said that the independence of Southern Sudan was reassuring to those people oppressed by their rulers.¹⁰⁵ While some observers minimized the importance of Barzani’s call for self-determination, others claimed that Turkey, a long-standing NATO member, would block such a move in order to prevent setting a precedent for its own large Kurdish population.¹⁰⁶

Western Diplomats Flock to Arbil

Kurdish officials continued receiving considerable recognition from the international community because of their constructive mediating role between Sunni and Shiite political factions and for establishing peace and stability in their own region. On April 10, 2010, Barzani received a joint delegation from the European and Danish parliaments at his office in Salahadin.¹⁰⁷ Barzani told the European delegation that despite the earlier repression and extermination policy of the previous Iraqi governments, the Kurds have been able to rebuild their region and establish democratic and civil institutions. Barzani asserted that the Kurds continue to struggle in the face of those who hinder correcting the wrongs done to the Kurdish people and preventing internally displaced Kurdish families to reclaim homes and farmland taken away from them at gunpoint and given to Arab settlers.¹⁰⁸

On the same day, Barzani received the Russian ambassador, accompanied by his country’s consul general in Arbil.¹⁰⁹ Barzani denounced the terrorist attacks on the Moscow railroad station and expressed his condolences to the families of those killed and sympathy for the injured. The Russian ambassador expressed appreciation for Barzani’s help to establish a consulate in Arbil, which he said would facilitate attracting Russian companies to Kurdistan. The ambassador also announced that the Russian Higher Education Ministry had increased the scholarship quota for Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, opening the door to Kurdish students to pursue higher education.¹¹⁰ Barzani assured the ambassador of his government’s continued support to the Russian consul general and looked forward to seeing Russian companies establish roots in the region.

On May 31, 2010, Barzani received a high-level Swedish delegation, led by the minister of trade, and said that the Kurds had high regard for Sweden and appreciated Swedish government generosity to receive large numbers of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers and looked forward to strengthening commercial ties between the two sides.¹¹¹

The new German diplomatic representative in Baghdad visited Barzani in Salahadin on August 4, 2010, and exchanged views with him about the political and security situation in Iraq and Kurdistan.¹¹² He expressed his admiration for the achievements made in the region and wished to see Kurdistan's experiment spread throughout Iraq. Barzani told the German diplomat that KRG would be pleased to extend its support to his mission in Iraq and wished him success in his new assignment. On the same day, the Danish ambassador in Baghdad came to bid Barzani farewell as if Barzani were the Iraqi president or prime minister.¹¹³ While the ambassador thanked Barzani for his support during his assignment in Baghdad, Barzani was appreciative of the ambassador's role to strengthen ties between his country and the Kurdish region.

The flow of foreign diplomats to Arbil continued throughout 2010 and beyond. Barzani received the British state minister for Middle Eastern affairs, Alistair Burt, and his delegation on November 25, 2010.¹¹⁴ Burt said that he was pleased to meet with President Barzani and announced that his government had decided to raise the level of its representation in Arbil from an embassy representative to a consulate general. Burt added that he was carrying the greetings of John Major, former British prime minister, to the people of Kurdistan, expressed admiration for Barzani's achievements and said that he was closely following up on developments in the Kurdistan Region.¹¹⁵ He congratulated Barzani for the successful outcome of his initiative to break the political gridlock in Iraq following the March 2010 elections, which he described as a major breakthrough. Barzani thanked the British government for its decision to raise the level of its diplomatic representation and asked Minister Burt to transmit his greetings to John Major and that he would never forget his support for the Kurdish people during difficult times.¹¹⁶

Barzani and Minister Burt discussed the status of the Christian community in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and disputed Kurdish territories as well as women's rights. Burt expressed his government's appreciation for the KRG policy toward the Christian community, which he said was highly valued by the British government, especially Barzani's efforts to create a committee to follow up and solve issues concerning Christian refugees moving to the Kurdistan Region. Barzani assured Burt that his government was making maximum efforts to provide shelter to Christian

families and called on the Iraqi government and the international community for support. Both sides called for stronger ties between KRG and Britain and ways for British companies and investors to participate in the reconstruction of the region.¹¹⁷

US Conditional Support to the Kurds

Under pressure from Washington and Ankara, Barzani was able to bring Sunni and Shiite political factions together at a roundtable meeting in Arbil, leading to the emergence of a coalition government in Baghdad. While negotiating about the division of government posts, the two sides who had been at loggerheads for several years started talking about revision of the constitution, which recognized the KRG and accorded it the right to explore and manage its own oil resources to maintain its army and border guards and the right to disputed (Arabized) Kurdish territories. Although US and Turkish officials favored a Sunni-led government, the Kurds shifted the balance of power by supporting the Shiite bloc. The United States and Turkey feared that a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad would line up with Iran. Sunni Arabs had warned the Kurds that a Shiite prime minister could not force them to give up Kurdish land Arabized by Saddam Hussein's government and that they should join them instead. Although the Sunni Arabs were correct, they were equally opposed to Kurdish claims to Arabized Kurdish land.

Despite considerable sacrifices made by the Kurds to help the United States during the 2003 war, Washington offered the Kurds no definitive assurance about their future status. While delivering a lecture at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Amsterdam, Holland, on August 27, 2008, Martin Indyk, director of the Saban Center and former assistant to former American president Bill Clinton, said although the American presidential candidate Barack Obama had felt that the United States had "special responsibility for the Kurds," he did not make a specific proposal.¹¹⁸ He said that Obama was willing to support the Kurds if they condemned PKK attacks on Turkey and refrained from declaring independence. He added that the Obama administration would call on the "Kurds to seek their future in Iraq. But I think that both Barzani and Talabani understand and respect this."¹¹⁹ He opined that although the Kurds would like to become independent, it would be in their interest to moderate their position on their disputes with Arabs, seek their future within Iraq, and be mindful of Turkey's regional importance to the United States.

British and US Officials Consult with KRG Officials

Former British prime minister John Major was one of the top Western personalities who visited President Barzani in early 2011 (May 28) in order to touch base with Kurdish leaders. As a prime minister in 1991, Major joined hands with the then French president Mitterrand, Turkey, and US president George Herbert W. Bush to establish a safe haven zone in Iraqi Kurdistan for protecting fleeing Kurds from Saddam Hussien's army. Major carried Queen Elizabeth's greetings to Barzani and wished him success.¹²⁰

Barzani joined Major in the inauguration of the opening of the British General Consulate in Arbil on May 28. While delivering a speech at the KRP, Major was full of praise for the Kurdish people and for their accomplishment during such a short span of time (1991–2011). Major "[e]xpressed his admiration for development taking place in the region regarding democracy, economy and security."¹²¹

As a way to address KRG's concerns about the departure of US forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, a number of Western delegations visited the region to offer advice, moral support, and training opportunities to boost their security capacity. A delegation led by Thomas Steven from the European Union visited President Barzani on May 24, and offered to train KRG officials from the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Labor in order to upgrade their administrative and substantive skills and capacity to execute law and order.¹²²

General James Jones, former national security advisor to US president Obama; James Garner, former US general responsible for the 1991 Operation of Provide Comfort; and Dick Knapp met with Masroor Barzani, director of KRG's National Security on May 24 in order to assess the region's security concern.¹²³ Barzani told his guests Kurds were concerned about Kurdistan's security after US troop departure from Iraq. He asserted that the Kurds had little or no influence in the Iraqi security force because they accounted for only 2 percent of Iraq's army officers and 7 percent of the army.¹²⁴ Kurdish officials were supportive of US defense secretary Robert Gate's proposal for the continued US troop presence in Iraq under the pretext that the Iraqi army was not yet ready to assume full responsibility for Iraq's security.¹²⁵ While Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was receptive to the proposal, the Sadrists in his coalition opposed it, vowing armed resistance. However, by September, most Iraqi political factions, especially the Kurds, were supportive of some sort of US troop presence in Iraq, which was still quite volatile.

Chapter 6

Democracy or Lack of It

Many young Iraqi Kurds, who had admired presidents Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani for struggling to liberate them from oppressive Arab regimes in Baghdad, suddenly felt like outsiders on their own soil. Kurdish leaders seemed to have forgotten they were the trustees of their people and not owners of Kurdistan's rising political and economic fortunes during 1991–2012. Many Kurds wondered how their top guns became so wealthy so quickly while they continued struggling to make ends meet.

While Kurdish officials bragged about the political and economic progress they had made since 1991, their people accused them of corruption, nepotism, power grabbing, and of paying no heed to their constituencies' basic needs and aspirations. Although the situation in the region was better than the rest of Iraq and the neighboring communities, many Kurds and non-Kurds became disillusioned with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which started suppressing the freedom of expression, media, and individual rights.

Some Kurds ignored the fact that Kurdistan's democracy was work in progress and needed more time for fine-tuning in order to be able to establish effective checks and balances that would protect individual rights, the freedom of speech and assembly, and fight corruption and nepotism. However, the people of Kurdistan were quite impatient and tried to speed up the democratic process. Pundits admitted that despite their shortfalls, Barzani and Talabani had displayed good statesmanship at the regional, national, and international levels and laid the foundation for a democratic political system in the region. While the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) had succeeded in establishing a framework for a Kurdish state, they had yet to develop the practical details of their political system, including a broad-based public

participation and the creation of adequate checks and balances that would establish accountability.

Tom Friedman, author and journalist, once asked, "Why is Iraqi Kurdistan America's best-kept secret success?"¹ In answering himself, Friedman said it was "[b]ecause few people have visited there and because many people want to paint the whole Iraq War as an unmitigated disaster."² While some pundits claimed that the Kurdistan Region's democratic process was plagued with gaps, Friedman believed that Kurdistan's democracy was "a work in progress and it still needs a lot of work if it is going to deliver for all the Kurdish people the kind of governance they need and deserve."³ Friedman looked at the situation in the region as a glass half-full rather than a glass half-empty.

Mathew D. LaPlante of the *Salt Lake Tribune* wanted to validate "President George W. Bush's [democracy] vision for the Middle East might well look to the 15,000 square mile [Kurdish] region bordering Syria, Turkey and Iran."⁴ He noted the "mostly autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government has many of the [democratic] characteristics Bush coveted for all Iraq when he ordered the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime."⁵ He claimed that the KRG was a functioning, secular, democratic, and antiterror government, which was part of Iraq, "a nation stymied by corruption and mired in political impasse" and an uncertain future.⁶ In the eyes of Friedman and LaPlante, the corruption and nepotism in Kurdistan were insignificant compared to the rest of Iraq, ignoring the fact that they could get out of hand unless checked quickly.

The main problem that remained for the KRG was not the lack of knowledge about democratic principles, but the historical mistrust existing between Kurdish political parties who tried to get ahead of each other by short-circuiting the normal evolution of political systems. Pundits argued that the long-standing jealousies and ideological differences between the KDP, the PUK, and Gorran were indicative of their unwillingness to work together in order to build a functioning democratic system acceptable to all sides.

From 1994 to 1998, the KDP and the PUK engaged in a very destructive civil war during which thousands of Kurds were killed and each side held large numbers of prisoners for a number of years, fearing the other side might hatch a conspiracy against them. For this reason, each monitored closely the other side's security movements by controlling all means of communications with the other side. In the face of limited communication between KDP-controlled Arbil, and Sulaimaniya, which was controlled by the PUK, many feared that small incidents might unravel the regional government, which they agreed to unify in 1998, and open the door for central government to take over the region once again. While

claiming that they supported a free-market system, the PUK and the KDP each controlled mobile telephone companies in their separate regions and provided limited access to local residents to communicate with relatives and friends on the other side.⁷ The constituencies of both parties became frustrated with the parties and became increasingly vocal, demanding “free speech and press rights, greater administrative transparency, and an end to corruption.”⁸

Iraqi Kurdistan Turns into Hub for Middle East Kurds

Despite its internal problems and shortfalls, the Kurdistan Region became a sanctuary for many Kurds from around the Middle East, escaping repressive treatment by their governments and seeking education in the newly emerging Kurdish educational institutions, offering courses in Kurdish language, science, history, and culture. In an effort to assimilate their Kurdish population, the neighboring states had obliged their Kurdish minority to learn Persian, Turkish, and Arab history, language, and culture. The Kurds of the neighboring states were hungry for knowledge about their own roots.

Many Kurdish politicians and activists from around the Middle East sought directions from KRG officials about ways in dealing with their governments concerning their rights as a distinct group of people. Because of their ongoing intense political discord with their government, the Kurds of Turkey were in the forefront of the Kurds of Iran and Syria to seek advice from KRG officials on how to go about gaining greater individual freedom and the recognition of their ethnic identity, culture, and history by their government. Ahmet Turk, former cochair of the Democracy and Peace Party, and his colleagues made frequent visits to Iraqi Kurdistan in order to consult with Barzani and Talabani and other Kurdish politicians and discuss ways and means to deal with the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Layla Zana, former Turkish parliamentarian and head of the Kurdish women association in Turkey, imprisoned for 15 years for speaking Kurdish in the Turkish parliament, visited Iraqi Kurdistan on September 19, 2010, in order to touch base with women's organizations.⁹ Zana was received at the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing by Amina Zikry, member of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament (KRP). Zana told reporters that she had come to Kurdistan Region to attend Kurdish Women's conference and to follow up on arrangements for holding the National Kurdistan Conference to which all Kurds were invited.¹⁰ Despite several contacts

between KRG and Turkish and Kurdish political organizations, the conference did not materialize, mostly because of opposition from the PKK and its sister organization, the Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), fearing that the conference was designed by the United States to liquidate their organizations. However, KRG officials claimed that the purpose of the conference was to discuss ways and means to transform the Kurdish armed struggle to a peaceful and democratic movement. KRG offered sanctuary and advice to some 11 desperate Syrian Kurdish political factions during the 2011–2012 Syrian uprising on most effective ways to extract concessions from the Syrian opposition (Syrian National Council or SNC) stationed in Istanbul.

Nepotism and Corruption

Despite some of the good work they had done, the ruling Kurdish coalition (the KDP and the PUK) leaders were under attack by some of their constituencies for mixing politics with business in the interest of their own families, relatives, and cronies rather than their constituencies.¹¹ Members of opposition groups accused the regional administration of rampant corruption, abuse of public funds, and mismanagement of the region's resources. Pundits claimed that without political connection and membership or mandatory partnership agreement, one could not launch or implement any form of business investment.

Some businessmen, who preferred to remain anonymous, claimed that getting a permit from the KRG required either paying an exorbitant bribe or establishing a joint business venture, based on 50–50 profit sharing, with senior government officials. Despite security risks, they preferred to travel to Baghdad to obtain business permits rather than sharing their profits with undeserving KRG officials.

In citing the *Hawlati*, *Kurdish Media* reported on January 23, 2011, that a leaked report showed that contrary to PUK claims, only a few of a list of 117 pensioners, classified as ministers or deputy ministers, had served in that capacity. *Hawlati* claimed, “most of those names mentioned in the list are serving or served in Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Gorran [Change], and other political parties—they have only served in political Party capacity.”¹² The paper claimed 19 of the pensioners registered as ministers had died long before the emergence of the KRG in 1992. It also claimed that the list even included members of the renegade Gorran Party.¹³ The paper added that retiring members of the regional government and parliament received some seven thousand dollars a month for life, were assigned two

peshmarga guards, and were awarded five–ten parcels of land valued at thousands of dollars, even if they had served less than two years.

Observers warned that unless the KRG exercises greater transparency, stops the practice of nepotism and corruption, and starts hiring based on need and competence, it would end up like Saddam Hussein's bloated government, which isolated itself from the general public, restricted individual freedom, and discouraged creativity and private initiative. If the KRG wanted to avoid replicating the failed authoritarian practices and economic policies of the neighboring states, they should start practicing democratic principles by showing greater respect for individual rights and embrace a new modality of governance based on professionalism, competence, creativity, human rights, equality, and equal employment opportunities.¹⁴

Many local residents in the Kurdish autonomous region accused top-ranking KRG officials of installing their immediate family members, relatives, and cronies in high government positions and paying no heed to nonpartisan-qualified individuals unless they announced loyalty to their party in advance. Despite holding several elections since 1991, party leaders failed to create a broad-based democratic government that would function outside Barzani's and Talabani's circles. While some Kurds praised KRG officials for having been able to gain international recognition and opening doors to foreign investors and consulates, they called for a truly unified government and security force, transparency, fair distribution of the newly created wealth, and an open-door policy for hiring and firing public servants. While Kurdish bureaucrats claimed that they had created a model democracy for the neighboring states to copy, the KRG increasingly resembled its autocratic neighbors, where party leaders ruled in perpetuity.

Kurdish voters called on the ruling parties to earn their hearts and minds and not take them for granted unless they diligently listened to their demands and served their needs and aspirations. The Kurdistan Region appeared to be in dire need for nurturing civil societies, democratization, and people's participation. The KRG is on the right path and can become one of the brightest spots in Iraq and the Middle East.

Freedom of Assembly and Press

While claiming that the political system they were building could serve as a democratic model for the neighboring states, the KRG deprived its own people of the freedom of speech and assembly. The arrest of Kamal Sayid Qadir, university lecturer, by the KDP and crackdown on Halabja

demonstrators on March 16, 2006, were unwelcome events for many Kurds and non-Kurds, who for the first time openly criticized the regional administration and called for greater freedom for the press and assembly and for individual rights. While condemning the destruction of the Halabja Anfal memorial by demonstrators, many condemned KRG's harsh treatment and arrest of demonstrators. The arrest and manhandling of Hawez Hawez, a high-school teacher and *Hawlati* reporter, for writing an article criticizing Kurdish administrations in both Arbil and Sulaimaniya for corruption and nepotism, was widely condemned. The court initially charged Hawez with defamation, but later released him on bail, indicating that the judicial system was not so neutral.

Newspapers cited the arrest of the editor-in-chief of *Hawlati* newspaper and Twana Osman of the *Weekly Hawlati* by the PUK administration in Sulaimaniya as an example of undemocratic conduct by Kurdish leaders, who lamented Saddam Hussein's government for mistreating their people prior to 1991. Now both party leaders were abusing the human and civil rights of their own people. The Sulaimaniya authorities forced both Hawez and Osman to resign from their jobs for refusing to sign documents promising not to write articles critical of the local administration.¹⁵

When the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) criticized the KDP and the PUK for corruption and decided to split from the Kurdistan Alliance (KA), their offices were set on fire and four of their members killed. The KIU and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) became increasingly disillusioned with the ruling parties for denying them their fair share of KRG's revenues. The repressive behavior of the KDP and the PUK led to the increasing shares of the two Islamic parties from three seats in 1992 to five in the regional parliament in 2005. While trying to reconcile interparty political discord, a member of the KIG announced the ruling parties had implemented only half of their demands by September 12, 2011.¹⁶

Unidentified men kidnapped a student journalist, Sardasht Osman, aged 23, on May 3, 2010, in front of Salahadin University in Arbil, and took him across some 13 heavily guarded checkpoints to Mosul, where they tortured and shot him in the head twice and dumped his body on a roadside some 50 miles west of Mosul, outside KRG's jurisdiction.¹⁷ Some observers alleged that the reason for dumping Osman's body outside the KRG-administered region near Mosul was to implicate the al-Qa'ida, in his death.¹⁸ It was difficult to tell whether Osman was campaigning to expand the boundaries of democracy and individual freedom or if he merely wanted to soil Barzani's family name on behalf of his own party, Gorran, led by Nawshirwan Mustafa.

Osman was extremely critical of KRG practices, alleging it was riddled with corruption and nepotism.¹⁹ Ranj Ala'aldin wrote on the Kurd.net

website on May 13, 2010, that Osman “pushed the boundaries of freedom in the region by publishing a number of inflammatory articles, insulting senior officials of the ruling PUK and KDP.”²⁰

About one thousand protestors, mostly PUK and Gorran party members, demonstrated in Sulaimaniya on May 13, 2010, condemning the slaying of Osman, which they blamed on the KDP. Nabaz Goran, a Kurdish writer, chanted, “We all are other Sardashts,” claiming that he had escaped from Arbil to Sulaimaniya after KDP security officers beat him for criticizing the KRG.²¹ Demonstrators were cited saying that they did not fear death and called on regional authorities to “reveal truth” about Osman’s death.²² Although the KRG was a partnership government between the KDP and the PUK, demonstrators in Sulaimaniya on February 17, 2011, described it as a KDP-controlled government. Demonstrators in Arbil presented a memorandum to Kamal Kirkuki, speaker of the KRP, calling on the parliament to make concerted efforts to bring the kidnappers of Osman to justice.²³ For his part, Kirkuki conveyed his condolences to Osman’s family and promised the protestors that he will closely monitor the issue.

Asos Hardi, a writer and Kurdish intellectual, opined that the regional government could no longer silence Kurdish public opinion. Protestors also took to the streets in Arbil and sought a plausible explanation about Osman’s murder. Hardi was later beaten up by an unknown assailant and was sent to hospital for treatment.²⁴ The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) condemned the attack on Hardi.

Members of the Gorran Party alleged it would have been impossible for the kidnappers to escape given the KDP’s tight grip on the security in Arbil.²⁵ In response to finger pointing, the Regional Security Agency of Kurdistan, controlled by Masroor Barzani, President Massoud Barzani’s son, issued a statement on May 14, 2010, stating that KDP had noted with deep regret that the Gorran media was exploiting the murder of Osman to attack the regional authority and leadership through a disinformation campaign.²⁶

On May 8, 2010, President Barzani established a committee, consisting of representatives from the Ministry of Interior and other pertinent regional security agencies, to investigate Osman’s murder.²⁷ In order to depoliticize Osman’s murder, the regional authority described the incident as a capital offense aimed at undermining the security of the Kurdistan Region.

The extensive coverage of the incident by Gorran and its TV and radio stations and newspapers, demanding the resignation of the regional minister of interior and police chief, angered members of the KDP politburo who accused Gorran of inciting violence against the KDP and its leadership.

Mohammed Mala Qadir, member of the KDP politburo, said Gorran was waging media war against them and that this was “the beginning of cold war by unfounded accusations.”²⁸

Human rights advocates and Kurdish journalists continued protesting the “torture and slaying of a young journalist, challenging what they said were oppressive restrictions on free speech in a part of Iraq that presents itself as safe and democratic.”²⁹ In a message to Iraqi Kurds, President Barzani strongly condemned the killing of Osman on May 20, 2010, and “called on all sides to deal with the issue in a responsible manner and convey their ideas and comments freely, and accusing no party without evidence.”³⁰ He called on the regional government to bring the perpetrators to justice and asked for people to leave the matter to security officials. Barzani also called on all Kurdish political parties to unite and meet their historical responsibilities and said that the security of the region was still under threat: “While I urge everyone to act responsibly and express their critiques freely, I also urge you to be bound by the ethics of journalism and Kurdish morality, not accusing anyone without evidence.”³¹

Although Barzani’s statement came a little late, it was helpful to break the cycle of self-destructive finger pointing. Barzani’s statement was an attempt to end interparty media attacks. The KDP media had “described [Nawshirwan] Mustafa and his movement [Gorran] as an anarchic body, anti-Kurd and of being behind all the massive campaigns and demonstrations which emerged in Sulaimaniya and other cities of Kurdistan to protest the killing of Mr. Osman.”³² Some observers feared that the Kurd-on-Kurd media war would undermine Kurdish unity and jeopardize their bargaining position vis-à-vis Arab blocs during negotiation to form a new government in Baghdad following the March 7, 2010, elections.

When an *al-Hayat* reporter asked Barzani in his office in Salahadin on May 22, 2010, about the murder of Osman, he replied by saying that his murder was tragic and that Barzani himself was responsible for the security of all the citizens of the region and that he was proud of the long Kurdish struggle and its achievements.³³ He said that the incident was a case of murder but exploited by some political quarters in an evil and unethical manner. He added that accusing certain individuals and parties in advance of investigations and court rulings under existing sensitive conditions was uncalled for and that no one was above the law.

In an interview with the *Golan Magazine* on May 30, 2010, Masroor Barzani, chief of Kurdistan’s Intelligence Department, declared, “Every one of us felt sad about the murder of the young student Osman, and we condemn the murderer. On the other hand, I as a person, we as a political party and regional institutions, have to spend all our efforts and will do our best to investigate this terrorist action.”³⁴ He said that certain

political quarters unfortunately politicized the incident from day one and used it against the KDP. He said that the KDP had never opposed holding public demonstrations and the incident should be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice; he added that the finger pointing at the KDP raised concerns that some quarters were trying to destabilize the region.³⁵ He argued, "It is too bad that these people play with the future of the Kurdish people, because any attack against any symbol is an attack against all the people's achievements. They unintentionally serve a foreign agenda."³⁶

The death of Osman triggered angry debates about the limits of democratic practices in the region, cited as a model for the rest of Iraq and Arab states. Incidents of this nature and its aftermath raised questions of whether democracy would take root in the region and how quickly Kurdish politicians could reject their Middle Eastern totalitarian mindset, and family, tribal, and party loyalties in favor of an open democratic society.

Asos Hardi told reporters that Kurdish intellectuals and journalists would continue campaigning until the regional security stops intimidating, harassing, arresting, and abusing journalists.³⁷ KRG officials, including Massoud Barzani, had often filed lawsuits against journalists critical of the KDP and the PUK, calling them traitors and foreign agents, and had tried to lure them to join the official media apparatus.

Lawsuits against Journalists

A senior KRG official, who preferred to remain anonymous, told reporters that there were numerous news outlets in the Kurdish region but only a few observed standards of journalism "in a deeply conservative and clan-based society where honor killings remained common."³⁸ Kurdish novelist Bakhtiyar Ali said redlines were imposed by government officials to serve their interests and that "[t]he killers of Sardasht are among us. They will once again kill someone else somewhere else," unless the regional government changes its attitude and undemocratic practices.³⁹

The lack of the freedom of press and assembly came to a head once again in the Kurdistan Region on July 9, 2010, after President Barzani returned from touring Europe and the Middle East. The independent and opposition journalists complained that the KRG had excluded them from Barzani's news briefing about the outcome of his tours.⁴⁰ *Awene* and *Hawlata* complained of being denied access to press releases and interviews with KDP and PUK officials. Shakhwan Mahmoud, a freelance journalist, claimed that "[t]he difficulty involved in accessing information and our

absence from such conferences makes it difficult for the people to know what is going on around them.⁷⁴¹

In citing "Reporters Without Borders (RSF)," *Kurd.net* wrote on January 3, 2011, that during recent months more and more lawsuits had been brought against Kurdish journalists, who were spending more time in courtrooms than in writing about the ongoing events in the region.⁴² Rahman Ghareeb, director of the Metro Centre Journalists, alleged that political parties had filed dozens of lawsuits against different newspapers during 2010.

Kamal Rauf, editor-in-chief of *Hawlati*, stated, "There are nine lawsuits against our newspaper. The aim of the lawsuits is to intimidate and force the press to keep from engaging in the work of independent media."⁴³ Ahmed Mira, editor of the *Levin Magazine*, said that there were 27 lawsuits against his magazine. The journalists complained that the KRG was diverting their attention from practicing journalism to clearing their names in courtrooms.

On January 5, 2011, Reporters Without Border came out in support of Kurdish demonstrations in Sulaimaniya, protesting against restrictions on the freedom of assembly and press and in support of two newspaper columnists, sued by the ruling KDP.⁴⁴ The KDP sued Mariwan Wyrta Qani and Aras Fatah for writing a joint article critical of Barzani's threats that "all those who did not respect the government's redlines or questioned the political status quo, in which Barzani's KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) together control the regional government."⁴⁵ Qani and Fatah, lecturers at the University of Amsterdam, wrote a joint article for the weekly *Awene* expressing concerns about press freedom in Iraqi Kurdistan and said, "KDP has dictatorial tendencies . . . wants to silence all criticism . . . monopolize the political arena and eliminate independent media."⁴⁶

Kirmanj Gundi, professor at Tennessee State University, also wrote an article stating that the KDP and the PUK "controlled presidency, premiership, parliament, police security, judiciary and media," reminding him of Saddam Hussein's era.⁴⁷ Gundi wrote that while KRG officials initially thought they could use the slogan of democracy to boost their position, they quickly realized that free media, which holds them accountable for their action, was indeed a threat to their survival as politicians.⁴⁸ Mohammed Kyani, lawmaker and member of Gorran, held a news conference in front of the Iraqi parliament on January 11, 2011, and accused President Barzani of dictatorship and of violating human rights for saying "that not a single policeman could be recruited without first securing his personal agreement."⁴⁹

It might have been for the aforementioned avalanche of criticisms and finger pointing that Nechirvan Barzani, former prime minister and the

KDP deputy, announced on January 10, 2011, that since his party was committed to the freedom of expression, they had decided to drop all lawsuits against newspapers and writers.⁵⁰ He told *Rudaw* that the KDP was not against freedom of expression and that he had always called for a dialogue between the media and the regional authority. However, he then said the media ought to undertake its work with a sense of responsibility and in line with the law.⁵¹ He added that the law, which regulates media, was articulated by the regional cabinet but was revised by President Barzani in order to accord reporters greater freedom of work. He added that as a goodwill gesture, the KDP had decided to withdraw all legal lawsuits against newspapers and authors and hoped that reporters would be more objective and avoid taking personal vendetta against government officials. He concluded by saying the KDP welcomed constructive public criticisms because President Barzani was accountable to his constituency.⁵²

The Kurdish community in the United Kingdom held a large demonstration on January 16, 2011, against the new press law passed by the KRP, restricting the freedom of nongovernmental organizations, civil societies, independent journalists, and intellectuals.⁵³ While welcoming Nechirvan Barzani's announcement, the people of Kurdistan demanded that the new media law be overhauled and warned Barzani that he should take heed of the revolution in Tunisia.⁵⁴ Mariwan Wyrja Qani described the lifting of the lawsuits as a "positive and moral event," which he said was a step in the right direction. In response to the conciliatory gesture of Barzani, he cancelled an interview he had arranged with a Dutch radio station for January 11, 2011.

Some journalists wanted President Barzani to understand that the people of Kurdistan voted for him as a president to serve their needs and aspirations and not as a lifetime dictator such as Husni Mubarak of Egypt, or the Saudi King Abdulla, or Bashar al-Assad of Syria. If Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani believed in democracy, they should gradually shed their nepotism and corrupt practices and do the groundwork for their early replacement with nonfamily members or close relatives and close friends. While it was understandable that as they did not trust each other, Talabani and Barzani surrounded themselves with relatives and cronies in order to protect their narrow party and family interests, it was incumbent upon them to quickly open the door to others to carry the Kurdish flag forward in the spirit of greater democracy and equality.

Had it not been for some cool heads, Osman's murder could have triggered another civil war in the region, squandering the political and economic gains made since 1991. However, it appeared that after taking a deep breath, Kurdish politicians realized that the Kurds had already suffered considerable pain and that they should stop the finger pointing before the Osman incident turned self-destructive.

Many Kurds accused the regional administration of using excessive force to silence public demonstrations on February 17, 2011, demanding transparency and fight against corruption and nepotism. When Stefan Bentle, outgoing German consul general, was asked if KRG's harsh treatment of protestors, who demonstrated in solidarity with Tunisian and Egyptian protestors, was justified, he responded that the situation in Kurdistan was different than that in Egypt, because "despite all shortcomings here [Kurdistan], people can criticize the rulers," and that "democracy and freedom of expression and the press have made significant progress."⁵⁵ While recognizing the lack of transparency, domination of the economy by politicians, and shortage of jobs and better education, Bentle opined, "Peaceful demonstration is a natural right, but the demonstrators have to know what will be jeopardized [political and economic gains] if they insist on bringing down the ruling system in Kurdistan."⁵⁶ He added that although the elections in Kurdistan was just compared to many other countries, the Kurdish region was in the process of learning how to separate legislative, executive, and judicial powers from each other, as President Barzani had already acknowledged.⁵⁷ While the opposition has the right to pursue reforms through democratic channels and without paralyzing the whole system of government, they should be watchful of government practices in order to combat corruption, nepotism, and suppression of freedoms.

Chapter 7

Peshmarga and Disputed Kurdish Territories

Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's army in 2003, Kurdish *peshmarga* fighters were the only organized and disciplined force who helped the US army liberate the northern provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salahadin, and Diyala from Iraq's army and helped fighting the Sunni Arab insurgency in the center. Yet the US army and diplomatic corps and Iraqi Arab opposition tried to dismantle the *peshmarga* organization by bringing it under central government control. Since the *peshmarga* had been part and parcel of the Iraqi Kurdistan liberation movement against the central government since the 1940s, it was a major asset to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in their struggle for creating the de facto state of Kurdistan.¹

Efforts to Marginalize *Peshmarga*

Iyad Allawi, the first Iraqi prime minister following the downfall of Saddam Hussein's government, traveled to the Kurdistan Region on July 12, 2004, to seek help from his old colleagues, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, to staunch the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the center and south. In a complimentary remark at a joint news conference in Erbil, Allawi said that Kurdistan would remain in the heart of Iraq and that he would never forget the days of struggle by the opposition and Iraqi nationalists.² Allawi hoped that through sweet talk he would be able to convince Kurdish political leaders to help him not only fight the sprawling Arab

insurgency but also downsize the *peshmarga* through attrition in order to prevent the Kurds from pursuing their national agenda of nation-building while Iraq's central government was weak and under foreign occupation.

Allawi's message was in concert with America's earlier promises to Ankara during fall 2002 that it would not allow Iraq's Kurds to declare independence during the war.³ Allawi claimed that he had come to Arbil to strengthen ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and identify joint projects for building the new federal democratic Iraq. On his part, Barzani politely said that all of his resources were at the disposal of the federal government for creating an Iraq based on respect for minority rights that would not treat the Kurds as second-class citizens henceforth. Allawi then left Arbil for Sulaimaniya to meet with Talabani in Qalachulan, near the city of Sulaimaniya, in order to discuss the issue of the *peshmarga* and seek his help to fight the growing Sunni Arab insurgency. However, the Kurds were more concerned at the time about the status of disputed Kurdish areas and thousands of the internally displaced Kurds. Allawi promised Talabani that he would address the issues of major concern to him, including the future status of Kirkuk.⁴

Although the KDP and the PUK had formed a joint government in Arbil, each retained its own separate *peshmarga* force because of deep mistrust between the two sides who could not decide whether they were friends or foes; however, the two sides worked as a front when it came to government efforts to cannibalize their *peshmarga*. Hazim al-Sha'alan, Iraqi defense minister, who was accompanying Allawi, told reporters that 20 percent of all militias (*peshmarga*), including those of the Kurdish political parties and Iraqi Communist Party, would be incorporated into the nascent Iraqi army. *Al-Zaman* reported that some twenty-five thousand *peshmarga* fighters were on their way to Baghdad to fight against outlaws.⁵ Kurdish officials felt insulted by al-Sha'alan when he called the Kurdish *peshmarga* "militia," while the Kurds considered them as their saviors, heroes, and main political assets.

Kurdish politicians wondered why Allawi was so eager to dismantle the *peshmarga* unless he was planning to bring the KRG under his direct control. It soon became evident that Allawi was not on a peace mission, when his spokesperson, Gergis Hormuz, told reporters that the prime minister had made it clear to Kurdish leaders there could be no military force in Iraq but the Iraqi army and that the Kurds had understood the message.⁶ He told reporters the Kurds were an integral part of the Iraqi people and Kurdistan was an inseparable part of Iraq, the same slogan used by Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party members. Hormuz added that *peshmarga* were part of the national force, which had been providing security for the Kurdish region for more than 12 years. Allawi told reporters, "There is no room for any militias in Iraq" and that "[e]verybody should follow the

bounds of law.”⁷ The arguments advanced by Allawi and members of his delegation against *peshmarga* reminded Kurdish officials of the dark days under Saddam Hussein.

The Kurds feared that Allawi had come not only to dismantle their precious *peshmarga* but also to retrieve the military hardware they had captured from Saddam Hussein’s fleeing army from disputed Kurdish areas in 2003. While the Kurds had no problem cooperating with the US and Iraq’s officials, they had no intention of disarming themselves under pressure from Allawi. While they were aware of the fact that they had to establish working relationships with the US and Iraqi government, they had no intention of dismantling their *peshmarga*. So they offered some of their well-trained *peshmarga* security and intelligence units (*Asayish/Zanyari*) to Allawi in order to help him penetrate and destroy Sunni Arab insurgent and terrorist cells in the center.⁸ In addition to disputes over the status of *peshmarga*, the KRG came into head-on collision with Arab nationalist political factions on the status of disputed Kurdish areas, hydrocarbon law, and federalism.

Role of *Peshmarga* in Disputed Kurdish Territories

In an interview with the London-based *al-Sharq al-Awsat* on March 14, 2009, President Barzani warned that the “situation in Iraq would not be stable without solving the Kirkuk cause,” which was a major concern to the Kurds.⁹ Many observers agreed that there was a slim chance that the central government, dominated by Arabs, would quickly address Kurdish demands and grievances. Neither Allawi nor Ibrahim al-Ja’afari, prime ministers during 2004–2005, made any move to address Kurdish grievances. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s performance vis-à-vis the Kurds was no better than that of his predecessors during 2006–2012.

In line with the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) forged between the United States and Iraq, US troops were obliged by al-Maliki to withdraw from city centers, including disputed areas in Kirkuk, Khanaqin, and Mosul, in 2009, creating a security vacuum, which the Iraqi army could not fill. Radical Islamic groups and Sunni Arab nationalists soon exploited the situation and started attacking Kurds, Shiites, and Iraqi forces at will.¹⁰ As a pressure mechanism to push *peshmarga* out of disputed areas, which the US described as a trigger line, al-Maliki blamed the Kurds for the eruption of violence. But the KRG resisted withdrawing its *peshmarga* units from the disputed areas, arguing that they were protecting the Kurdish community from Arab insurgent attacks.

Kurds of Nineveh under Attack

In one incident a small Shabak community of Shiite Kurds was attacked by two truck suicide bombers wiping out the entire village of Khazna, consisting of 30 houses, located ten miles east of Mosul.¹¹ The two trucks exploded simultaneously, creating two large craters, mixing body parts and blood with debris. George Kako from the adjacent village of Bartella told reporters that it was “a horrifying and disgusting scene,” describing the perpetrators as not being humans. Another villager from Khazna shouted angrily, “Look, Mr. Prime Minister, where is the security that you speak about?”¹² Mosul is home to ultra-Arab nationalists aligned with governor Atheel al-Nujaifi. While opposing the presence of *peshmarga* in these villages, he was unable to protect the lives of innocent villagers.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote:

The attacks serve as a reminder that although the U.S. military says it is on track to complete the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq [city centers] next August [2010], the potential for fresh conflict between Arabs and Kurds in the north, and Sunnis and Shiites elsewhere, remained real. U.S. Defense Department spokesman Geoff Morel told reporters that although Washington was pleased with the meeting between al-Maliki and Barzani on August 2, they were still concerned about general frictions between Kurds and Arabs and that Washington would continue to watch the situation and would like to keep some troops in disputed areas.¹³

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates flew from Baghdad to Arbil on July 28, 2010, in order to consult Barzani and try to dampen the heightened tension between Arbil and Baghdad. Gates offered US help to “resolve disputes over boundaries [of disputed areas] and hydrocarbons.”¹⁴

Senator John McCain, who led a three-man mission to Arbil, met with President Barzani, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, and the KRP speaker on August 14, 2009, during which the heightened tension in Mosul and Kirkuk and KRG’s relationship with Baghdad and Turkey were discussed.¹⁵ Turkey used its Turkman proxies in Iraq in order to block the KRG from reclaiming disputed Kurdish areas, fearing that would embolden the Iraqi Kurds to seek independence. McCain claimed that the purpose of his mission to Arbil was indeed to help settle pending disputes between KRG and Baghdad and that the United States wanted to have a role in bringing the two sides closer together.¹⁶ In reality, the United States did not make any serious efforts to mediate between Arbil and Baghdad to settle the pending disputes. The thorny issue of disputed Kurdish areas remained alive well beyond the US troop departure from Iraq.

On August 13, two suicide bombers struck a coffee shop, frequented by Kurdish youth during summer months, in the disputed Kurdish district of Sinjar, killing 21 people and injuring many more.¹⁷ Governor al-Nujaifi once again attributed the attack to the presence of *peshmarga* units in the area and demanded that they be withdrawn.

Attackers killed more than four hundred Yazidi Kurds in a series of attacks during August 2007 and wounded many more.¹⁸ Radical Muslim groups describe Yazidi and Shabak Kurds as infidels for practicing their own traditional non-Islamic religions.

US major general Robert L. Caslen told Pentagon reporters in a teleconference that the discord between the Kurds and the Arabs was a major danger to Iraq's stability, which could lead to sectarian violence. He warned that the al-Qa'ida and other radical groups in Mosul still showed sustained capacity "to conduct the high-profile attacks."¹⁹ The frequent warnings by US military and diplomatic corps about the looming danger of ethnic and sectarian violence were designed to put pressure on the KRG to withdraw its *peshmarga* units from all disputed areas.

Dakheel Qassim Hassoon, a Kurd and administrator of the Sinjar (Shingal) district of Nineveh province, told reporters on August 17 that the Sunni Arab al-Hadba political party, led by governor al-Nujaifi, was responsible for the bloodshed in Kurdish districts and towns by taking the side of radical Arab groups.²⁰ In the absence of government help, the Yazidi community in Sinjar started building barricades around their villages and formed community guards in order to protect themselves from Arab insurgent attacks.²¹ Hassoon said it was difficult to defend Kurdish villages along the Syrian border and that they needed more *peshmarga* units to protect them from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq, who had described Yazidis as infidels. The Islamic State of Iraq organization warned that they would blockade Sinjar and its satellite villages where Yazidi, Shabak, and Shiite Turkman communities resided.

Despite precautionary measures taken by Kurdish communities, suicide bombers were able to strike at the village of Wardek, dominated by Kurdish Kakayi sect, east of Mosul, destroying a large number of houses, killing at least 19, and injuring some 30 people.²² The leader of the terrorist group, Saddam Isma'il Hamdani, who attacked Wardek, and was captured on September 13, turned out to be a Sunni Arab member of al-Hamdani tribe in the Nineveh province.²³ Kamal Kirkuki, speaker of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, condemned the attack on Wardek village and claimed that the attackers and those behind them were trying to terrify the Kurds in the province of Nineveh to force them out of their homes and farms.²⁴

It appeared, at times, that government and terrorist forces had synchronized actions against the Kurds in Kurdish disputed areas. While the Iraqi

army tried to dislodge Kurdish *peshmarga* from their positions, Arab insurgents attacked Kurdish villages, killing and maiming innocent people. Al-Maliki sent large numbers of troops to the Kurdish town of Makhmour in Mosul on June 28, 2008, in order to dislodge Kurdish *peshmarga* from the town claiming that *peshmarga* were violating the constitution by functioning outside their jurisdiction, KRG-administered areas.

While accompanying Iraqi troop movements in the Nineveh province, US military forces quickly intervened to prevent a military standoff between *peshmarga* and Iraqi forces. It looked as if the US and Iraqi forces were testing the will of the KRG in disputed Kurdish areas. President Barzani said what was taking place was unacceptable because he had earlier warned the central government against unilateral Iraqi troop movement in disputed areas.²⁵ Although al-Maliki acknowledged there had been misunderstanding, Kurdish officials accused him of trying to drag the Kurds into a fight. The Kurds felt that government troop presence in disputed areas was an extension of Saddam Hussein's Arabization policy of Kurdish land.

Kirkuk's Security under Threat

As for the dispute over Kirkuk, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament, Iyad al-Samarrai, suggested resolving the issue gradually by the provincial council with the backing of the United Nations, which al-Maliki had rejected earlier.²⁶ Yet, al-Samarrai was critical of the US and UN representatives in Iraq for not having made greater efforts during 2003–2009 to address the problem. He said the dispute over Kirkuk was one of the major problems hindering the political process in the country. He claimed that the government, Arab political factions, and Turkmen in Kirkuk have rejected the Kurdish demand to incorporate the oil-rich Kirkuk province into the KRG-administered region.²⁷

The UN representative in Iraq proposed three alternative solutions to deal with the issue of Kirkuk, one to revise Article 140, the other for Kirkuk to become like any other Iraqi province, which the Arabs preferred, or one to give Kirkuk a degree of autonomy, which the Turkmen preferred.²⁸ The Kurds rejected the UN proposal and suggested that the status of Kirkuk should be decided through the ballot box. President Barzani was disappointed with Arab political factions for not acknowledging the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds and recognizing the illegal way Kirkuk was emptied of its Kurdish population.

The deputy Iraqi parliament speaker, Arif Tayfour, a Kurd, said that the United Nations should propose solutions and not become a party in the dispute.²⁹ Although the Kurds were unhappy with the UN proposals, they

did not reject them outright, fearing they might offend US officials who had supported the UN report.³⁰ US defense secretary Robert Gates pressed Barzani and al-Maliki during his August 1 visit to Baghdad to reach a compromise solution on Kirkuk before holding the 2009 provincial elections.³¹ Rifa'at Abdullah, the PUK leader in Kirkuk, said that interference by the neighboring countries, implying Turkey, had made the situation more complicated by insisting that the dispute should be settled through consensus rather than the ballot box.³²

Saddam Hussein loyalists and Ba'ath Party armed groups continued terrorizing Kurdish and government targets in Kirkuk in an effort to force the Kurds into submission. Terrorists detonated a car bomb in front of a house in Kirkuk on September 10, 2009, killing eight internally displaced family members, who had returned to their house only a few days earlier.³³ A few days later, a roadside bomb killed major General Hussein and four of his men in the town of Armili and another roadside bomb killed two and injured two in Daquq, southeast of Kirkuk.³⁴

In the absence of a satisfactory resolution to the future status of Kirkuk, Arabs and Turkmen continued boycotting the Kurdish-dominated administration of Kirkuk, demanding equal distribution of power between them; 32 percent for each of the three major communities and 4 percent for the Christians. The Kurds agreed to the Arab-Turkman proposal on condition that the same principle would apply in the disputed provinces of Mosul and Diyala, which the latter two rejected.³⁵

Following his arrival to Kirkuk on July 14, and after a meeting with Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen leaders, US general Mike Mullen, the US military joint chief of staff, said that Washington did not have a solution for the complicated problem they faced and that the people of the province should reach a consensus among themselves.³⁶ Contrarily, President Barzani claimed that Kirkuk had always been part of Kurdistan historically and geographically and that the KRG had many other pending disputes with Baghdad requiring urgent solutions.³⁷

Some analysts interpreted Mullen's visit to Kirkuk as a warning to the Kurds that they should exercise flexibility in order to normalize the situation in Kirkuk and other disputed territories. Nazar Hayder, an Iraqi affairs analyst in Washington, said, "Reports indicate that the U.S. is trying to convince Iraq's Kurd leaders to postpone any decision due to the issue's sensitivity, and that the dispute cannot unilaterally be settled" by the Kurds.³⁸ Others alleged that Mullen was trying to tell the Kurds to stop dreaming about Kirkuk. Yet others argued that the United States was exploiting the situation to strengthen its long-term foothold in disputed Kurdish areas by creating conditions necessary for continued US troop presence in the region. In order to appease Baghdad and Ankara, the United States did not make a serious effort to settle the issue of disputed Kurdish areas.

During his visit to Baghdad in early July 2009, US vice president Joseph Biden was told that he should “communicate to the Kurdish leadership . . . that their passing a constitution through their parliament in Kurdistan was not helpful to the process that was underway.”³⁹ The KRG had unilaterally declared in its revised constitution that the disputed areas, including Kirkuk, were part of Kurdistan geographically and historically, raising concerns in Baghdad and Washington about the ongoing efforts to settle the issue through consensus, as Ankara, Turkmen, and Arabs had demanded. Biden failed to travel to Arbil to meet with presidents Barzani and Talabani in the north because of a dense sandstorm.⁴⁰ Al-Maliki had told the *Wall Street Journal* that Biden had promised him to urge the Kurdish leaders to postpone holding a referendum on the revised regional constitution in order to avoid political sensitivities.

Once again in early 2012, the Kurdistan parliament revived the debate about the revised regional constitution, which was at variance with the Iraqi constitution’s failure to recognize disputed (Arabized) Kurdish areas as part of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴¹ Arab political factions recognized the Kurdish autonomous region as the geographic area demarcated by Saddam Hussein, excluding Kurdish areas that were ethnically cleansed and Arabized by the former government. The Iraqi constitution recognizes the area under KRG control at the outset of the Iraqi War in 2003 as Iraq’s Kurdistan.⁴² The KRG representatives on the constitutional committee, led by US advisors, erred in not defining the boundaries of Iraqi Kurdistan more clearly by insisting that it includes areas administered by KRG in 2003 plus Kurdish lands that had been ethnically cleansed by Saddam Hussein. While articulating the constitution, US advisors described Arabized Kurdish land as disputed areas and called on Kurds and Arabs to deal with the problem when a democratically elected government was formed. The Kurds felt cheated and enraged to see their fellow Arabs make the outcome of Saddam Hussein’s aggression against them a reality on the ground.

Despite the ongoing efforts to stabilize the security situation in disputed areas, al-Maliki remained aloof, hoping that the Kurds would stop demanding the return of disputed areas. The government and US officials’ mixed signals emboldened Arab nationalists and radical Islamic groups to escalate attacks on Kurdish and government targets in Kirkuk and other disputed areas. Armed men from two speeding vehicles shot and killed five Iraqi soldiers at a checkpoint southwest Kirkuk on September 12; a similar attack had killed two others in Kirkuk a day earlier.⁴³

US combat troop withdrawal from city centers at the end of August 2010 and the downsizing of US troops in Iraq from one hundred thousand to fifty thousand and switching from Operation of Iraq Freedom to Operation of Dawn became of great concern to KRG officials in disputed

areas. US major general Anthony Cucolo was cited telling reporters, "What I would like to see happen is they [Arabs and Kurds] go from tripartite to bilateral" between Iraqi and *peshmarga* forces and then transferring responsibility to the local police force.⁴⁴ This of course was easier said than done because of the long-standing mistrust between Kurds and Arabs.

Kurdish officials were alarmed by Washington's move to replace Ambassador Christopher Hill in Baghdad by Ambassador James Jeffrey, who had previously served in Ankara for several years and praised and admired Mustafa Kemal Atatürk for creating an exclusive ethnic Turkish state, which had denied its Kurdish population of its fundamental rights.⁴⁵ Shortly after his arrival in Iraq, Jeffrey paid courtesy visits to KRG president Barzani and prime minister Barham Salih during August 2010 and later told reporters, "I was delighted today to meet President Talabani and to present my diplomatic credentials."⁴⁶ KRG officials were hopeful that Jeffrey would make efforts to understand their grievances and that the United States would support their cause.

Odierno Proposes Stationing US Troops in Disputed Areas

In the face of increasing attacks on Kurdish and other minority groups in disputed Kurdish areas, US commander general Raymond Odierno announced on August 18, 2009, that "[h]e would like to station American troops along disputed areas in northern Iraq to build rapport between Iraqi government troops and those under the command of the autonomous Kurdish government."⁴⁷ Odierno told reporters that al-Maliki and Kurdish officials were "receptive to the idea, which could be implemented this fall [2009]."⁴⁸ Odierno also claimed that the presence of US troops in disputed areas, which would be temporary, would make all sides more comfortable. The Kurds hoped that US troop presence in disputed areas would not help the central government to flood the area with Iraqi troops, as the United States had done since 2008. He said, "[T]op officials from Baghdad and the Kurdish government will convene next month [September 2009] to discuss the plan," and "that a greater percentage of the dwindling U.S. force is likely to be stationed in northern Iraq."⁴⁹

Fu'ad Hussein, Massoud Barzani's chief of staff, confirmed on August 19 that Iraqi, Kurdish, and US officials had agreed to form joint security committees and forces in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala to address security problems in disputed areas.⁵⁰ Hussein noted the agreement was reached between the Kurdish ministry of *peshmarga* and Iraq's Ministries

of Interior and Defense as well as General Odierno in Baghdad on August 15 to jointly monitor the security situation in disputed areas. Hussein emphasized that the US role was important for coordinating security matters within those sensitive areas.⁵¹

Hareem Kamal Agha, the PUK leader in Mosul, told reporters on September 14 that five major checkpoints would be established in each of the three provinces (Mosul, Kirkuk, and Diyala) and would be jointly commanded for gathering and sharing security information.⁵² He claimed the United States would not withdraw forces from these areas until the issue of disputed areas was resolved.

In response to those who opposed the joint security units, Christopher Hill, US ambassador to Baghdad, told reporters in Kirkuk that the joint Iraqi-US-*peshmarga* forces in disputed areas did not contradict the US-Iraqi security agreement (SOFA).⁵³ Hill held meetings with Abdul Rahman Mustafa, a Kurd and governor of Kirkuk, Rizgar Ali, a Kurd and chairman of the provincial council, and a number of other city notables. He later told reporters that he had benefited from the views expressed by Kirkuk's political leaders, independents, and nongovernmental organizations about the US policy in Iraq and about Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. He claimed that the United States supported UN efforts to find a solution that would satisfy all sides in Kirkuk. In reference to Odierno's proposal to form joint Iraqi-*peshmarga*-US forces, he agreed that the proposal was in line with Iraqi and KRG wishes.⁵⁴

Khasro Goran, a Kurd, former Mosul deputy governor, and the Kurdistan Brotherhood coalition (al-Muta'akhiya) leader, claimed that terrorists had been able to infiltrate the disputed areas of Tal Afar, Shingal (Sinjar), Khazna, Kulba, Sheikhan, and Sada, which were recently turned over to the newly established joint forces.⁵⁵ Goran added that about 80 percent of Kurdish disputed areas in the province of Nineveh were already under *peshmarga* control, and the joint forces were deployed in areas where the latest bombings had taken place.⁵⁶

Mohammed M. Hassan, the Khanaqin mayor, stressed that security forces were needed only in a few towns such as Qaratappa, Jalawla, and Sa'adiya, where there were no *peshmarga* and Kurds lived under very bad conditions.⁵⁷ Arif Adil, the Jabara administrator, also noted there were no Iraqi troops in the Jabara district, located to the northwest of Kifri, which he claimed was calm and did not need a tripartite force.⁵⁸

Despite the presence of joint security forces, a suicide truck bomber managed to enter Sinjar and detonate his explosives killing at least four and injuring twenty-three.⁵⁹ The same city was attacked by four suicide truck bombers on August 14, 2009, killing five hundred and injuring many more. President Barzani's office claimed attacks on disputed areas were aimed at forcing their Kurdish residents out.⁶⁰

Odierno Proposes a UN Force for Disputed Areas

In the face of continued violence in disputed areas, General Odierno told the *Associated Press* on July 6, 2010, "U.N. peacekeeping forces may need to protect disputed territories in the nation's north if tensions between Kurds and Arabs haven't ceased by the time U.S. troops leave in 211."⁶¹ He said that the simmering tensions between Kurds and Arabs over Kurdish claims to several areas in the provinces of Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala might trigger further violence unless addressed amicably before US troops pull out of the country. He warned, "If we have not integrated the *peshmarga* into the Iraqi army, we might have to think of some other mechanism."⁶² Odierno appeared to have been genuinely concerned about possible armed confrontations between Kurds and Arabs, with disastrous consequences.

Instead of capitalizing on General Odierno's idea to justify the need for a UN peacekeeping force, Jabbar Yawar told reporters on July 8, 2010, that Odierno was expressing his own personal views rather than those of Washington or of Baghdad.⁶³ He claimed that Baghdad and that KRG were making concerted efforts to settle pending disputes between them in advance of US troop withdrawal from Iraq. As for the integration of the *peshmarga*, Yawar argued that according to section five of Article 121 of the constitution, *peshmarga* was already part of the Iraqi army and that they had excellent working relationship with them.⁶⁴ Instead of building a case around Odierno's unofficial views of the need for an international force to stand between Arbil and Baghdad and strengthen KRG's calls for greater autonomy, Yawar dismissed them on the ground that the two sides were able to resolve their differences amicably. The Kurds realized the significance of a UN force in disputed areas only when the United States started pulling its forces out of Iraq.

Since the 2003 war, Arabized Kurdish territories such as Hawejja, west of Kirkuk, had turned into a hotbed for anti-Kurd Arab nationalism. Arab settlers in Hawejja supported and abetted radical Arab armed groups in an effort to abort implementation of Article 140. Yawar was naïve to believe that radical Arab nationalists such as al-Maliki, Usama al-Nujaifi, Dhafir al-Ani, and Salih al-Mutlaq would stop campaigning against Article 140 and other KRG demands. Odierno's unofficial suggestions were the best hope for the Kurds to protect their de facto state from internal and external threats.

General Kenneth Hessinger, deputy US military commander, told *al-Hayat* on August 25 that it was unlikely an international security force would be deployed to the disputed areas following US combat troop

withdrawal because of the complexity of the situation.⁶⁵ He claimed that his forces had agreed with the Iraqi side to keep disputed areas under the joint forces for now.⁶⁶ *The Christian Science Monitor* reported on August 24, "In this disputed city [Kirkuk], Kurdish forces are being trained by Iraqi army instructors in what officials call a breakthrough aimed at easing tensions between the two sides and securing Iraq's vulnerable border with Iran."⁶⁷ The United States had established a military training center in Kirkuk in an effort to integrate elements of *peshmarga* with the Iraqi army.

In an effort to calm the rising Arab opposition to *peshmarga*, the Iraqi army chief of staff General Babakr Zebari noted, "According to the law, the regional guards' [*peshmarga*] duty is protecting the Kurdish region as part of Iraq. They are one force under one authority, in one state, they legally carry weapons, and they are all part of the Iraqi defense system. There is no discord between the (Kurdish) Regional Guard and the Iraqi Army."⁶⁸ In reality, the situation on the ground was quite different than Babakr's assertions.

General Odierno tried to reduce "flashpoints between Kurdish and Iraqi troops that could threaten the security and forging stronger official ties between the Iraqi government and that of the autonomous Kurdish region."⁶⁹ These were all good intentions, except that the Arab majority did not trust the Kurds and suspected their future intentions. Odierno told the *Christian Science Monitor* reporter that "[h]e had reached an agreement with Maliki and Kurdish leaders to work toward integrating four *peshmarga* brigades into the Iraqi Army in disputed areas, a development he described as a huge step forward."⁷⁰ The United States provided vehicles and communication equipment to *peshmarga* but not arms, which Kurdish leaders considered essential for protecting the border region with Turkey and Iran. Al-Maliki strongly opposed providing arms to Kurdish forces, fearing that they might use them against the central government. The KRG prime minister Salih told reporters, "We are alarmed at the prospect of an Iraqi military armed with Abram tanks and F-16s while the Kurds are kept out of it. We should accept that we are all partners in this country and we should all be committed to its defense."⁷¹

As a caretaker prime minister and in the hope of getting the Kurdistan Alliance support for his reelection following the March 7, 2010, elections, al-Maliki signed an agreement with the KRG on October 26, 2010, consisting of eight points, including closer cooperation between the Ministry of Peshmarga and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense.⁷² KRG announced on its website: a "Peshmarga Ministry delegation has got together for the third time with Iraq's Ministry of Defense in Baghdad, attended by Sheikh Ja'afar Mustafa, Peshmarga Minister, Iraqi Defense Minister Abdul Qadir

Obeidi, Jabar Yawar, the Peshmarga Command spokesman, Lt Gen. Michael D. Barbero, Deputy commanding general for advisory and training with United States Forces-Iraq.⁷³ The eight-point agreement included coordination and cooperation between the two sides on security matters as well as training and equipping *peshmarga* by the Ministry of Defense and the US army.⁷⁴ The agreement called for training *peshmarga* in the framework of the Iraqi Defense Ministry's training program. The agreement also contemplated appropriation of annual budgets for *peshmarga*.

Shortly before departing Baghdad with his infantrymen, Lt. Col. Mark Bieger told the *Washington Post* reporter on August 19, "This is a historic mission. A truly historic end to seven years of war."⁷⁵ Bieger led the 4th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division out of Iraq and arrived in Kuwait on August 19, bringing the "Operation Iraqi Freedom," which started on March 19, 2003, to an end. Col. John Norris said that the soldiers were leaving Iraq as heroes and "I want them to walk home with pride in their hearts."⁷⁶ While the level of violence had declined considerably, compared to 2006–2007, Norris opined that this was "no longer America's war. Let history judge. That is not my call."⁷⁷ More than forty-four hundred US soldiers were killed and thousands maimed during the war, which afforded Iraqi Kurds a golden opportunity to turn their autonomous region into a de facto state of Kurdistan.

Some fifty thousand US soldiers and forty-five hundred special operation forces were left behind to train and advise Iraqi security forces until the end of 2011, when the remaining US troops were scheduled to depart the country. By October 2011, the US State Department, instead of the US Army, was to assume the responsibility for training Iraqi police.⁷⁸

In the absence of US forces "to defuse sectarian tensions in northern Iraq, it will be up to American diplomats in two new \$100 million outposts to head off potential confrontations between the Iraqi army and Kurdish *peshmarga* forces."⁷⁹ Citing the US State Department officials, the *New York Times* reported that the number of US security guards would increase to seven thousand, who would defend five fortified US Embassy compounds (bases) throughout Iraq, "operate radars to warn of enemy rocket attacks, search for roadside bombs, fly reconnaissance drones and even staff quick reaction forces to aid civilians in distress."⁸⁰

Some twenty-four hundred officers were designated to work at the US Embassy in Baghdad and other diplomatic sites as security personnel in order to "help the Iraqis purchase and field new American military equipment—and the civilians' growing portfolio have led some veteran Iraq hands to suggest that thousands of additional troops will be needed after 2011."⁸¹ Many Iraqis and Western observers felt the US timetable for troop withdrawal did not match with that of Iraq, which would continue to need

advice and logistical support for purchasing US M-1 tanks and F-16s for protecting Iraq's borders and airspace. While privately admitting that Iraq would need the United States' continued military support for some time in the future, US officials maintained silence in public for political reasons.

US-KRG Military Cooperation

Major General Anthony Cucolo, commanding US Forces-North, and his deputy, Brigadier General Tom Vandal, traveled to Arbil on January 12, 2010, in order to brief KRG president Barzani about the security situation in disputed areas.⁸² Coordination between US, Iraqi, and *peshmarga* forces in the provinces of Nineveh, Diyala, and Kirkuk was the focus of the meeting. General Cucolo told Barzani, "I am very pleased about the way the *peshmarga* and Iraqi Army forces are cooperating and working together. The training of these joint units is going very well."⁸³ Barzani thanked General Cucolo by stating, "We are prepared to offer any cooperation and assistance that is needed, and I hope this initiative will be a success."⁸⁴ Cucolo claimed that the northern area contains a "fault line" between Arabs and Kurds, Kirkuk was still a flashpoint, and that Baghdad and Arbil were capable of preventing possibilities of renewed violence.⁸⁵ A day earlier, Barzani had met with General Odierno for the same purpose, indicating the importance attached to the security and stability of disputed areas. Iraqi president Talabani told reporters on January 13 that "U.S. military forces have made commitment to train *peshmarga* forces after unifying them [PUK and KDP units]," and that "[n]egotiations are underway with Prime Minister al-Maliki to form two military divisions in Kurdistan."⁸⁶

All sides were hopeful that such cooperation between Iraqi and *peshmarga* forces would diffuse the rising tension between Kurds and Arabs in disputed areas. At a checkpoint on a highway near Qaratappa, Diyala, "five soldiers from each force worked a 24-hour shift, and inspected vehicles at random for explosives."⁸⁷ Sgt. First Class Chris Silsby told reporters on January 22 that things had been going well and no fighting had taken place between Iraqi and *peshmarga* forces thus far.

While this arrangement provided a degree of security in disputed areas, it also recognized the legitimacy of the KRG administration. Some Arab politicians protested the idea of joint forces in disputed Kurdish areas, fearing it might become a permanent separation line between areas administered by KRG and the rest of Iraq. A leader of the Arab front in Kirkuk "called upon the Baghdad government to prevent joint missions, calling them a rejected matter."⁸⁸

US trainers tried to establish mutual trust between Kurdish *peshmarga* and Iraqi forces in order to enable people in disputed areas to cast their votes freely during March 7, 2010, elections.⁸⁹ Odierno told reporters that although terrorists had killed a number of *peshmarga* earlier in disputed areas, no new incidents had been reported since the joint forces were deployed.⁹⁰ He said that deputy prime minister Rafie al-Isawi, a Sunni Arab, had established contacts with local Arab leaders in disputed areas in order to explain the purpose of the joint forces, noting that out of twelve disputed areas, five were in Kirkuk, one each in Salahadin and Sulaimaniya, two in Diyala, and three in Nineveh provinces.

Fear of Anti-Kurd Coup

Anxiety among Kurdish politicians mounted as the August 2010 deadline approached for US combat troop withdrawal from city centers. A revelation about possible Sunni Arab coup attempts prompted President Barzani to hold a meeting on January 11, 2010, with the newly unified commanding officers of the KDP and PUK *peshmarga* forces. During the meeting, he stressed the importance of the new arrangement and called for close coordination and cooperation in the face of the rising tension in disputed Kurdish areas in advance of the nationwide March 7, 2010, elections. Barzani asserted that “a single, unified force under the jurisdiction of the KRG Ministry of Peshmarga Affairs” was of great significance and “[w]ithout their [*peshmarga*] sacrifices and hard work, we would not have been where we are today.”⁹¹

Jabbar Yawar, spokesperson for Peshmarga Affairs, told reporters after meeting with President Barzani, on December 27, that a committee of top military officers was formed to unify the KDP and PUK *peshmarga* forces under the Ministry of Peshmarga Affairs.⁹² Regarding PUK’s four *peshmarga* divisions, he said nothing had been changed except for their leadership titles, claiming new cadres had replaced the old leadership guards, who had been trained at the Military Academy, wore similar uniforms, and worked under the same ministry.⁹³

The urgency for unifying the KDP and PUK party *peshmarga* units reflected the anxiety displayed by Kurdish officials regarding the redeployment of US combat forces in the face of the continued fluid security situation in Iraq and fears that the Iraqi army might one day try to reoccupy the Kurdish region. In the face of the flying rumors of a possible military coup before the March 7, 2010, elections, the Kurds sought some sort of US and international protection commitment.

Although the Kurds were a major political force to tip the balance of power in favor of al-Maliki following the March 7, 2010, elections, they did not trust him to honor his commitments to share power or protect the safety of Kurdish representatives in Baghdad. Saman Basharati wrote on December 29, 2010, that the KRG had dispatched ten thousand *peshmarga* fighters to Baghdad to function under the central government command, specifically to protect Kurdish politicians such as President Talabani, and Kurdish members of the cabinet and parliament from possible assassination attempts by coup plotters.⁹⁴ Mala Bakhtiyar, senior PUK politburo member, told the Kurdish television channel *Gale Kurdistan* that his party had prepared itself for the “worst case scenario, including military coups.”⁹⁵ Sheikh Ja’afar Mustafa, minister for *peshmarga* affairs, told *Rudaw* that the *peshmarga* would take orders from President Talabani and the Iraqi military chief of staff, Babakr Zebari, a Kurd, in Baghdad.⁹⁶ Jabar Yawar told reporters that although there was no real Iraqi government military threat against the Kurds in Baghdad, the KRG was taking precautionary measures against all eventualities. The Kurds feared that the central government, dominated by Arabs, might take extreme measures, following US troop departure.

As al-Maliki tried to consolidate his Shiite-dominated government, five former Iraqi Ba’ath Party groups held a meeting in Damascus on December 28, 2010, to plan their future strategy for Iraq, adding to the speculation that a coup might be imminent. The participants in the meeting decided to unify their ranks under the slogan of “Rebirth and Renewal Movement” (Tayyar al-Inbi’ath wa al-Tajdid).⁹⁷ The meeting described what Saddam Hussein did in 1979 as a bloody coup within the Ba’ath Party, during which he eliminated party leaders who had called for union with Syria. They claimed that Saddam Hussein abandoned the party’s bylaws and turned the party into a tool in his hands and called for cooperation with all Ba’ath Party branches in order to take the party back to its roots. The organizers of the meeting were Khalid al-Samarrai, secretary of the movement; Aalam al-Samarrai, National Liberation Movement; Nabil al-Dulaimi, the Toilers’ Group; Shahab Ahmed Lafi, Arab Renewal Movement; and General Abdul Khaliq, spokesman for the new movement. They called on Izzat al-Duri and Mohammed Yunis Ahmed, leaders of the divided Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath, to return to the party’s root.

The reemergence of former Ba’ath Party members and radical Arab nationalists, who acted in concert with al-Qa’ida in Iraq, was to undermine al-Maliki’s government. The security situation in Mosul, the bedrock of Sunni Arab nationalism and next door to Syria, where former Iraqi Ba’athists were planning their next move, showed increasing volatility immediately following the formation of the new Shiite-dominated government in December 2010.

By late December 2010, Mosul was witnessing heightened al-Qa'ida and Ba'ath Party attacks on Iraqi government targets.⁹⁸ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* reported that the assassination of the federal police commander in Mosul by three suicide bombers on December 30, 2010, raised suspicion that enemy had infiltrated Iraqi government security apparatus. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq and Ba'ath Party armed groups had earlier carried out attacks on government and Kurdish security forces throughout the Nineveh province.⁹⁹ The judicial system, exposed to blackmail and threats in Mosul, was unable or unwilling to enforce the law.¹⁰⁰ Members of the outlawed Ba'ath Party and their sympathizers in the government exploited the political disputes between members of the Iraqiya List, led by strong Arab nationalists such as Iyad Allawi, Usama al-Nujaifi, Dhafir al-Ani, and Salih al-Mutlaq, and Shiite political factions, led by Prime Minister al-Maliki, in order to make a comeback.

Out of concern for political and security uncertainties in Iraq, the KRG prepared itself for any eventuality by unifying the KDP and PUK *peshmarga* forces in order to preserve its political and economic gains since 1991. Over the last several years, the *peshmarga* had ballooned from about one hundred thousand in 2004 to about two hundred thousand in 2010. Despite numerous meetings, Arbil and Baghdad failed to agree who should finance and control the *peshmarga*.

According to Sheikh Ja'afar Mustafa, minister for *peshmarga* affairs, the KRG was ready by January 17, 2011, to reduce the size of its security force to seventy thousand, provided they remained under the KRG control.¹⁰¹ Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki sought the reduction of the force to about thirty thousand, a figure close to what Iraq's former prime minister Iyad Allawi had suggested in 2004. The central government feared the presence of such a large force under the KRG would threaten Iraq's stability. However, Mustafa argued that downsizing the force to seventy thousand was in line with al-Maliki's own demand during his first term as prime minister. He added that KRG was prepared to either put the remaining one hundred and thirty thousand force on pension or assign them to civilian jobs.

The handover of al-Bakkara US military base in southwest of Kirkuk on May 16, 2011, to the Iraqi army raised KRG's anxiety.¹⁰² Lt. Brigadier General Sarhad Qadir told *Aswat al-Iraq* that the United States had also transferred the al-Rashad base, 35 kilometers southwest of Kirkuk, near the volatile district of Hawejja, wherein resided Saddam Hussein loyalists, to the Iraqi army earlier in the year, making the Kurds extremely concerned about the future status of the province, which they consider their own.¹⁰³ Khalid Shwani, a Kurdish member of the Iraqi parliament, told reporters that the security situation in disputed areas would become chaotic "if all

U.S. combat troops leave the country by the end of the year as planned.”¹⁰⁴ The future of the disputed areas remained in limbo and became a major source of conflict between Iraqi troops and *peshmarga*.

The Issue of Disputed Areas Reemerge in February 2011

Arab and Turkman political factions and civil society organizations announced in early February 2011 that they had planned to hold demonstrations on February 25 in solidarity with the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings (Arab Spring), demanding better services, ending corruption, and expelling *peshmarga* from disputed Kurdish areas. Tension rose among Kurdish residents in disputed areas as news spread that armed Arab groups were preparing to push them out of their homes. Mahmoud Sangawi, *peshmarga* commander in Khanaqin, told reporters that *peshmarga* were monitoring a group of Ba’athists who paraded Saddam Hussein’s pictures and chanted Ba’ath Party slogans on the streets of Khanaqin in Diyal province.¹⁰⁵ When asked about the status of US forces in the area, Sangawi said that while monitoring the situation, they kept their distance from Arab-led demonstrators.

Out of fear that Arab nationalists and Turkmen might overrun the Kurdish community in Kirkuk, the KRP approved a bill to deploy five thousand *peshmarga* to the outskirts of Kirkuk in order to monitor the mounting anti-Kurd sentiment.¹⁰⁶ Kurdish officials claimed that Arabs and Turkmen were trying to provoke them into confrontation in order to oblige the central government to intervene and push *peshmarga* and Kurdish political parties out of disputed areas. Worst yet, the Kurds feared that confrontation between the Kurds—who controlled the provincial government and council in Kirkuk—and Turkman-Arab coalition might provoke intervention by Turkey, which had often threatened the Kurds with war, if they dared to put a finger on Turkmen.

In cooperation with local politicians, government officials, religious leaders, and personalities, KRG officials succeeded in convincing Kirkuk’s Kurdish majority to abstain from holding demonstrations on February 25, 2011, in order to prevent clashing with opposition groups. Kirkuk’s police chief, Sarhad Qadir, told reporters that arrangements were made in cooperation with the Iraqi Army and *peshmarga* commanders to prevent confrontations between opposing groups in Kirkuk.¹⁰⁷ Qadir told reporters that some quarters wanted to pursue their destructive aims during the demonstrations.¹⁰⁸ Nawzad Hadi, the governor of Arbil, said that all eyes

were on Kirkuk and that they would not allow any quarter to destabilize Kirkuk.¹⁰⁹

Large numbers of Arab and Turkman protestors, who had congregated in front of the governor's building in Kirkuk on February 15, called for the abolition of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, resignation of the provincial government and council, ending corruption, expulsion of Kurdish security (*Asayish*), and improving daily rations and living conditions in the province.¹¹⁰ The local police closely monitored the anti-Kurd demonstration, which was organized by the Arab Political Council and the Iraqi Turkman Front.

After the demonstrators started throwing stones, injuring a number of them, and began attacking the governor's building, the local police dispersed the demonstrators and quickly declared curfew. Some one thousand protesters in Haweija, about 40 miles west of Kirkuk, led by Ba'athist Party members carrying Saddam Hussein's pictures, attacked a police station, looted and burned its contents, killed two police officers, and injured 30.¹¹¹ Kirkuk's police chief Qadir told reporters that terrorists, especially members of the violent al-Naqshbandiya group, led by former Saddam Hussein's deputy Izzadin al-Duri, had infiltrated the demonstrators and tried to destabilize Kirkuk.

Amid the chaotic situation in Kirkuk, representatives of Kurdish political factions, including KDP, PUK, Kurdistan Communist Party (KCP), Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), Gorran, and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), held a meeting in Kirkuk to discuss ways to defuse the heightened tensions and prevent any possible threat against the Kurdish community there. The deputy secretary of the PUK Kusrat Rasul Ali chaired the meeting, which was also attended by Nechirvan Barzani, former KRG prime minister and deputy secretary of the KDP.¹¹² The meeting called for the unity of ranks, protection of Kirkuk's residents irrespective of their ethnic and sectarian identity, and resisting pressure to withdraw *peshmarga* units deployed to the outskirts of Kirkuk until the security situation had stabilized.¹¹³

UN Intervenes in Kirkuk

In the face of the ongoing demonstrations in Iraq and Kurdish areas, the UN representative in Baghdad, Ad Melkert, quickly traveled to Washington for consultation with US officials regarding the heightened tension in disputed Kurdish areas. Melkert told reporters on February 22, 2011, that the ongoing protests in Iraq and Arab countries (Arab Spring)

reflected the need to resolve festering disputes between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq before they erupted into an open conflict.¹¹⁴ He claimed that in cooperation with the Iraqi government and KRG, his office had been trying to set an agenda to address disputes over oil revenue sharing and the future status of Kirkuk.¹¹⁵

Upon his return to Baghdad, Ad Melkert held a meeting with the Iraqi parliament speaker Usama al-Nujaifi, Arab nationalist leader from Mosul, on March 2, during which they discussed issues related to US troop withdrawal from Iraq at the end of the year and the status of disputed Kurdish areas. Al-Nujaifi's office issued a statement claiming that the speaker had told Melkert that the political situation in Iraq was extremely complicated due to lack of trust between the rulers and those ruled and that they needed the help of a neutral body such as the United Nations to stabilize the country.¹¹⁶ He had assured Melkert that the parliament was paying close attention to demonstrators' grievances and pressing the government to respect their demands, including freedom of press and a time frame for meeting those demands. For his part, Melkert had expressed concerns about the use of excess force in dealing with demonstrators on February 25 and had called for greater people's participation in government.

Al-Nujaifi called for a positive UN mediation role between opposition factions in Kirkuk in order to calm the situation, which he claimed was inflamed by the deployment of *peshmarga* in the city. He warned that in case the situation exploded, it would engulf the entire country and invite regional states' intervention. Al-Nujaifi called on Melkert to deactivate the time bomb by pressing the Kurds to withdraw their *peshmarga* from the city and hold new local elections to reinstate the balance of power that would satisfy all sides or give the province a special status for a number of years until the situation had normalized.¹¹⁷

In response to al-Nujaifi's call, Sheikh Ja'afar Sheikh Mustafa told reporters on March 2 that KRG sent *peshmarga* to Kirkuk not to occupy it but to avert chaos and protect people's lives and property during the February 25 demonstrations.¹¹⁸ The officer-in-charge of the Ministry of Interior, General Hussein Kamal, a Shiite Arab, acknowledged that *peshmarga* were sent to protect Kirkuk's population from threats posed by terrorists and Ba'athist Party members, who wanted to create chaos during the demonstrations. He added that *peshmarga* were part of Iraq's defense force and that Iraqi and US forces had advance knowledge of their deployment.¹¹⁹ When asked about his response to Arabs call for withdrawing *peshmarga* from Kirkuk and Mosul, General Kamal said that these forces had played an important role in maintaining peace and stability in Kurdistan. General Aziz Waisi, commander of the Zarivani *peshmarga* brigade, claimed that his force came to Kirkuk upon a request from governor Abdul Rahman Mustafa, and "[w]e will never leave" unless he asks us to do so.

While Amjad Shakali, a Kurdish author, opined that *peshmarga* should not have left Kirkuk after they occupied it in 2003, Arif Qurbani, member of the PUK, claimed that the presence of *peshmarga* in the city would speed up its return to KRG.¹²⁰ Rizgar Ali, chairman of Kirkuk's provincial council, told reporters that *peshmarga* was deployed to Kirkuk and other disputed areas after an agreement was reached among KRG, Baghdad, and American forces in advance of the Day of Rage, February 25 (Arab Spring).¹²¹ The KRG claimed they were able to foil Saddam Hussein loyalists' plan to attack and gain control of Arabized Kurdish territories during the "Day of Rage" demonstrations on February 25.¹²²

The US military and diplomatic corps and Iraqi government officials had earlier appreciated the security role of *peshmarga* in Kirkuk, but suddenly reversed course, under pressure from Arab and Turkman political factions.¹²³ In an effort to calm the situation, the Kirkuk police chief, Jamal Tahir, told reporters that the presence of *peshmarga* in Kirkuk was temporary and that they would be withdrawn as soon as the situation improves.

Radical Arab and Turkman political factions spread fears that Kurdish *peshmarga* were on the verge of entering the city and forcibly annexing it to the KRG. Both US and Turkish officials dispatched their separate emissaries to Arbil to calm the rising tension resulting from *peshmarga* deployment to the outskirts of Kirkuk. US ambassador James Jeffrey and General Lloyd Austin paid a visit to Barzani in Arbil on March 5 in order to exchange views about the security and political situation in Kirkuk.¹²⁴ Barzani and Jeffrey agreed to continued cooperation in the framework of the established tripartite arrangement, consisting of the Iraqi army, *peshmarga*, and US forces, in order to amicably deal with the aftermath of the February 25 demonstrations in Kirkuk and its outskirts.¹²⁵

For its part, Ankara quickly dispatched deputy minister of foreign affairs Feridun Siniriloglu to Arbil on March 6, a day after US officials met with Barzani regarding the evolving security situation in disputed Kurdish areas. Siniriloglu, who was accompanied by Turkish ambassador to Iraq, Murat Azcelik, and Turkish council general in Arbil, Ayden Silcen, transmitted the greetings of President Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan to Barzani and said that Turkey looked to closer cooperation with Arbil and appreciated Barzani's role in the ongoing political process in Iraq.¹²⁶ Although the two sides did not announce details of their meeting, observers believed that Ankara had sent Siniriloglu to Arbil to remind the Kurds that the final status of Kirkuk cannot be resolved except through consensus.

In the absence of progress during the 2005–2011 Iraq government, Turkey and the United States feared that the Kurds might try to take back the Kurdish disputed areas by force rather than through consensus. What Turkey and the Iraqi government tried to do was to turn the demographic changes and Arab settlements in Kurdish areas into reality and prevent the

Kurds from reclaiming Arabized Kurdish areas. Turkey did not want Iraqi Kurds to set a precedent for its own Kurdish population and territories.

In line with the aforementioned developments in Kirkuk, UN representative in Baghdad Ad Melkert prepared a report for the UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon critical of the deployment of *peshmarga* to the southern and western outskirts of Kirkuk. While delivering his report to the Security Council, Ban Ki Moon warned that Iraq might lose all its recent security and political gains unless it responds to people's call for reforms, creates employment opportunities, and improves the delivery of basic services.¹²⁷ He also called for protecting minorities, especially Christians, who had fled Mosul and Baghdad to the Kurdish region. He added that the latest events in Kirkuk confirmed the need for intensifying dialogue between Arabs and Kurds as well as Iraq's political leaders. He was critical of the way Iraqi security forces handled the February 25 demonstrations, during which some people were killed, wounded, arrested, and tortured and journalists mistreated.¹²⁸ He alleged that *peshmarga* units were deployed "without authorization and described them as a threat to the province [Kirkuk]" and said it was a mistake.¹²⁹ Jabar Yawar, spokesperson for the Ministry of Peshmarga Affairs, described Ban Ki Moon's report as being inaccurate because *peshmarga* deployment "to Kirkuk was based on an already agreed upon deal signed by President of Kurdistan Region Massoud Barzani and Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki," and added that the KRG would officially respond to the UN secretary general.¹³⁰ In addition to forming the backbone of the de facto Kurdish state, the *peshmarga* played a major role in keeping the issue of Arabized Kurdish territories alive.

KRG Dragged into Taking Sides

By May 2012 the KRG was in a bitter row with Prime Minister al-Maliki, not only about the status of *peshamarga* but also about disputed Kurdish areas, oil exploration, and revenue sharing. Barzani accused al-Maliki, whom he helped to be reelected as prime minister, of having turned into a dictator. Tony Karon of globalspin.com wrote,

The power struggle in Baghdad has escalated to alarming proportions in the months since the last US troops withdrew in December 2011, with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki eschewing the principle of a unity government that gives all stakeholders a share of power and instead amassing power in his own hands. Even the radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose support was critical to getting Maliki reelected, has taken to referring to the Prime Minister as the dictator.¹³¹

In an effort to counter Kurdish claims to disputed Kurdish areas, al-Maliki held his government's nineteenth regular cabinet meeting, boycotted by Kurdish ministers, in Kirkuk on May 8 and declared that Kirkuk was an Iraqi city. In response, Kurdish officials argued that they acknowledge Kirkuk is an Iraqi town, but insisted that it has a Kurdish identity. The Kurds claimed that al-Maliki's latest statement indicates that he has had no intention from the outset to implement Article 140 of the constitution.¹³²

Frustrated with Prime Minister al-Maliki's increasing authoritarian tendencies, unwillingness to address Kurdish grievances, and continued threats of retaliation against the KRG for signing oil exploration contracts with foreign oil companies, President Barzani feared that their political and economic achievements since 1991 might be in jeopardy.¹³³ Barzani went to Washington on April 4, 2012, in order to exchange views with President Barack Obama and members of his cabinet about the deteriorating political situation in Iraq and to urge them not to deliver F-16 fighters and other sophisticated military hardware to al-Maliki's government, fearing that they might be used against the Kurds.¹³⁴ President Obama had telephoned al-Maliki one day before Barzani's arrival in Washington, "recommending a national conference this week to bridge the sharp differences between rival political blocs in the country."¹³⁵ Al-Maliki had sidelined not only the Kurds but also the powerful Sunni Arab political bloc "Iraqiya List," led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi.

On his way back to Iraqi Kurdistan, Barzani stopped over in Turkey for consultations with President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Erdogan concerning Iraq's Sunni Arab vice president Tariq al-Hashimi, accused of leading a death squad. After meeting with Barzani, al-Hashimi decided to remain in his Istanbul hideout pending the resolution of the political stalemate in Iraq through a national conference proposed by Barzani.¹³⁶ Erdogan ignored the Interpol Red Note alert, issued upon al-Maliki's request, for al-Hashimi's arrest. Despite pressure from the United States, neighboring countries, and members of his own National Alliance (Shiite bloc), al-Maliki was adamant on settling his differences with Sunni and Kurdish blocs on his own terms.

In an interview with *Rudaw*, Fu'ad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, said that the president has reached the conclusion that it is impossible to do business with al-Maliki and that he should be replaced by another individual.¹³⁷ Upon his return to Kurdistan, President Barzani dispatched his prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, accompanied by a large delegation, to Ankara in order to seek ways and means for closer cooperation with Turkey on matters related to regional security, Syrian conflict, the PKK, commerce, and energy.¹³⁸ Celcuk Unar, spokesman for Turkey's Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, opined, "The Iraqi Kurds are playing an international role legally and legitimately in all Iraqi politics and we are talking with them on many issues, the political situation in Iraq and in the region."¹³⁹ Barzani, who arrived in Ankara on May 17, received a red carpet welcome, "with meetings with the Turkish president Gul, prime minister Erdogan and foreign minister."¹⁴⁰

Emboldened by their closer ties with Ankara, the KRG stood its ground in dealing with al-Maliki's government, which was internally and regionally isolated. In response to threats from Baghdad to deduct payments to foreign oil companies working in the autonomous Kurdish region from KRG's 17 percent oil share, the KRG stopped the flow of oil from Kurdistan's oil fields to the international markets. In a tit-for-tat duel, al-Maliki threatened to halt the supply of refined oil products to the Kurdish region. On May 21, Nechirvan Barzani dropped a bombshell at the opening of an international oil conference in Arbil, attended by local and international oil companies, when he announced that Arbil and Ankara had reached an agreement to extend two oil pipelines from Kurdistan to Turkey, one from Taq Taq and another from Kirkuk oil fields, a disputed Kurdish town.¹⁴¹ He added that in line with the Iraqi constitution, the KRG will remit the proceeds to the central government after deducting from it Kurdistan's 17 percent share. He also said that the KRG would import refined oil products from Turkey in exchange for crude. He said that the participation of Turkey's energy minister and other Turkish officials in the conference reflects the extent of the existing cooperation and coordination between the two sides in the field of energy, natural resources, and commerce and that Turkey, with its large economy, offers the KRG and Iraq a major export outlet. The new development puts further distance between Arbil and Baghdad and brings Iraqi Kurds a step closer to independence, provided that Turkey does not alter its policy toward them.

Chapter 8

Military Standoff in Disputed Areas

Kurdish disputed areas can be defined as those parts of Iraq's Kurdistan that are still or were predominantly Kurdish before they were ethnically cleansed and settled by Arabs from other parts of Iraq and annexed to the neighboring provinces of Ta'amim, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salahadin. Arabization of Kurdish territories started following the creation of modern Iraq in the 1920s, when the Arab-dominated governments in Baghdad pushed north in order to assimilate the Kurds, who accounted for about 20 percent of Iraq's population.

The 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States offered the Kurds an opportunity to establish a *de facto* quasi-democratic Kurdish state encompassing the provinces of Sulaimaniya, Arbil, and Duhok with a landmass of about 22,000 square miles.¹ This left about 40 percent (7,000 square miles) of the historically known Iraqi Kurdistan of 29,000 square miles under the central government.² The changes made in the administrative boundaries of Iraqi Kurdistan reduced its size from 11 to about 8 percent of Iraq's landmass of about 262,400 square miles.³

The US forces prevented the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from recouping Kurdish areas falling outside their control on March 19, 2003, when Saddam Hussein's government fell. US officials described these areas as disputed areas and told the KRG to settle the issue with the central government in Baghdad. Arab political factions agreed to address the issue by applying Article 58 in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which was later changed to Article 140 in the Iraqi constitution. However, the Arab-dominated government in Baghdad failed to implement Article 140 by the due date of December 2007. While the KRG insists that the dispute be settled through a referendum, as prescribed in Article 140, the government, supported by the neighboring Turkey, wants the problem settled through arbitration and consensus.

Kurds Fear Betrayal by Iraqi Arabs and the United States

The year 2008 was critical in the 2003 Iraq War for the Kurds in that their usefulness to the United States was declining, especially following the collapse of the Shiite militia in the south and the Sunni insurgency in the center. The United States openly undermined Kurdish interests in an effort to win Sunni Arabs to its side. The US military and diplomatic corps put the Kurds through the grinder in order to tame their increasing appetite for power by forcing them to accept the reality established by Saddam Hussein's government in disputed Kurdish territories, which the United States described as a powder keg.

As a way to divide the Sunni Arab insurgency, the US army and diplomatic corps tried to restore some of their earlier political power in Baghdad and provinces bordering the Kurdistan Region. The Kurds strongly resisted the US, Iraqi Arab, and Turkish pressure to relinquish their rights to homes and farms taken away from them by Saddam Hussein's government at gunpoint and given to Arab settlers from the south and center during the 1980s and 1990s. While US officials, who helped articulate Iraq's new constitution, were aware of the ramifications of Article 140, they poured billions of dollars into disputed areas in order to transform Sunni Arab insurgents into paramilitary groups not only to fight al-Qa'ida but also to strengthen the Arab hold on Kurdish disputed areas.

While trying to bring the violence between Sunni and Shiite Arabs under control, the US army helped intensify the long-standing dispute between Arabs and Kurds over Arabized Kurdish territories. The Kurds felt betrayed by the United States when they learned that they were creating, arming, training, and financing Sunni Arab militias in the framework of the al-Sahwa movement (Awakening) in ethnically cleansed Kurdish territories. The Kurds also feared that the creation of Sunni Arab paramilitary forces in central Iraq was aimed at pushing Kurdish *peshmarga* out of disputed areas and exposing Kurdish communities in mixed population areas to insurgent attacks and intimidation, which later took place in Diyala and Nineveh provinces.

The new US policy brought the al-Sahwa militia into a collision course with Kurdish *peshmarga* and emboldened Arab settlers to hold on to land they had illegally occupied. This change came while the KRG was pressing the central government to implement Article 140 by providing financial incentives to Arab settlers to return to their original domiciles. Instead, the settlers who had received financial compensation moved to new addresses within disputed areas, especially in Kirkuk.

The US military and diplomatic corps also helped Sunni Arabs to consolidate their power base by pressing the Iraqi government and parliament to pass new legislation (provincial election bill) that would help Sunni Arabs gain control of provincial governments and councils in central provinces, including disputed Kurdish areas. This was aimed at realigning the balance of power in the predominantly Sunni Arab provinces where the Kurds and Shiite Arabs had gained considerable influence during the 2005 elections. Sensing the political chess game in Iraq, KRG tried to establish a foothold in predominantly Kurdish areas of Nineveh, Ta'amim (Kirkuk), and Diyala provinces, where the US and Iraq government were fighting Sunni Arab insurgents. The 2009 provincial elections helped Sunni Arabs control the provinces of Nineveh, Salahadin, Diyala, and Anbar, except Kirkuk, where elections were postponed for political reasons.

In addition to realigning political power, the United States put pressure on the KRG to withdraw its *peshmarga* units from disputed Kurdish areas, as demanded by Arabs and Turkmen, accusing the Kurds of overreaching their boundaries and creating conditions for a new civil war. With the US and Iraqi government understanding, the Kurds had kept a number of *peshmarga* units in disputed Kurdish territories since the outset of the 2003 war, partly to protect Kurdish communities from Arab insurgents and partly to show their unbending claim to their ancestral land.

Mohammed al-Shaheen, director of the civil service project in the Sunni Arab Haweija settlement created in the 1930s, west of Kirkuk, told reporters that he had established a company with US support to address the unemployment problem among youth in his and others' localities.⁴ He claimed that the project was supported 100 percent by the US military in an effort to create jobs for some 500 people, 250 of whom were members of the US-supported al-Sahwa paramilitary council and 250 were from Haweija rural areas. He added that his plan involved training youth in construction, technology, literacy, and water storage projects, covering the entire province of Kirkuk, including Dibs, Shwan, Qarahanjir, and Laylan, located in the heart of Iraqi Kurdistan, as if they were preparing for armed confrontation with the Kurds.⁵

Pundits alleged that the reason for empowering Sunni Arabs in disputed areas was to squeeze the Kurds out of their ancestral land, which happened to be rich in oil. While the Kurds described *peshmarga* as their security blanket, the US and Iraqi officials described them as obstacles to peace and stability. Some Kurds accused the United States, Arabs, and Turkmen of being interested only in Kirkuk's oil and not in its people. The governor of Kirkuk, Abdul Rahman Mustafa, said the oil was a curse for Kirkuk's residents, who he said suffered from high unemployment and lack of social services and "[o]il has destroyed our land; oil has changed

the demographics,” and we now “feel there is an injustice done to Kirkuk because of oil.”⁶ Ahmed Askari, a Kurdish member of the reconstruction committee of Kirkuk’s provincial council, told reporters that the province’s enormous wealth had been used to develop other parts of Iraq and not Kirkuk. Mahbuba Kakamir, housewife, told a reporter, “What is the use of living on a sea of oil if it does not improve my life?”⁷

Some Kurdish officials claimed that outside powerful forces, especially Turkey and the United States, incited Arabs and Turkmen against the Kurds to advance their own commercial and political agenda, while the Kurds were seeking a democratic solution, a referendum, to address the issue of disputed areas. Arabs, Turkmen, and US officials instead called for consensus, complicating and defusing the issue by playing politics to appease this side or that.

Military Standoff in Diyala

By 2008, the *peshmarga* had become a thorn in the side of the United States and the central government. While Sunni and Shiite Arabs were fighting a civil war, the Kurdish *peshmarga* filled the security vacuum in disputed Kurdish territories in order to protect local Kurdish residents. However, after the US and government forces restored a degree of stability to Basra and Baghdad, they pressed the KRG to withdraw its *peshmarga* units to the Kurdish autonomous region. They wanted to sidestep the legal complications involved in settling land claims and discourage the Kurds from acquiring more land that might improve their viability as a state.

Al-Maliki instructed Iraqi army units, accompanied by US forces, to enter the predominantly Kurdish districts of Diyala in an effort to gain control of disputed areas by pushing *peshmarga* units out of the province. In a move to undermine the authority of the KRG, Iraqi army commanders gave direct order to Kurdish *peshmarga* units to withdraw from Khanaqin within 48 hours. Mohammed al-Askari, spokesman for the federal Ministry of Defense, told reporters on August 12, 2008, that in line with an agreement between the central government and KRG on August 10, *peshmarga* units should withdraw from Khanaqin within the deadline set.⁸ Al-Askari claimed that the constitution had limited the scope of *peshmarga* operations to the autonomous Kurdish region.

The Kurds took the central government order as a threat, thinking that more would follow unless they showed resolve. The Kurds were not surprised as much by the central government’s order against *peshmarga* as by the way they implemented it. Kurdish officials would have liked for the

central government to discuss the issue with them rather than giving direct orders to *peshmarga* units to leave Khanaqin as if they were under central control. The KRG considered the government's action not only as an insult but also as a way to undermine their authority.

At a joint news conference with the US general David Perkins, al-Askari claimed that it was the central government that had asked *peshmarga* earlier to fill a security gap in Diyala and was now asking them to leave the area.⁹ Al-Askari noted that in view of the ongoing large-scale military operation hunting down extremists, *peshmarga* should get out of their way as had been agreed earlier. While the Iraqi army and US forces were unable to stabilize areas under their control, they unwittingly tried to open up disputed areas to al-Qa'ida in Iraq and Sunni Arab insurgents, who continued terrorizing them in other parts of Diyala. In fact, the insurgents remained active in Diyala well after the United States pulled its troops out of Iraq at the end of 2011. Some 11 members of two families, associated with al-Sahwa paramilitary groups created by the US military during 2008 in Ditala, were killed or injured on May 22, 2012, by unknown attackers.¹⁰

Anwar Hussein, administrator of the Jalawla district in Diyala, told reporters that the entry of the Iraqi and coalition forces into Jalawla, Sa'adiya, and Qara Tappa had raised tensions in the area and might turn into armed confrontations between *peshmarga* and the Iraqi army.¹¹ By evicting the *peshmarga* units from northern Diyala, Iraqi and US forces would have set a precedent to evict *peshmarga* from other disputed Kurdish territories, emboldening Sunni Arab insurgents and endangering the life of Kurds and others in disputed areas. Despite US and government claims of improved security, hundreds of Kurdish families were under daily threats of Sunni Arab insurgents in mixed populated areas in the center of Iraq.

In an effort to tighten the screws on the Kurd, Turkman and Arab political factions tried to drag Turkey into the conflict by accusing the Kurds of Kurdifying Diyala by using sheer force. Turkey had threatened the Kurds earlier with war if they tried to retrieve disputed Kurdish areas by force or harmed their Turkman brethren. Sirwan Zahawi, a Kurdish lawmaker in the Iraqi parliament, denied the Kurds were trying to take over Diyala, claiming that *peshmarga* was part of the Iraqi defense force and merely protected members of the Kurdish community in disputed areas.¹²

Another Kurdish lawmaker, Adil Barwari, rejected the word "militia" used by Arab and Turkman politicians in describing *peshmarga*. He wondered why some political factions were picking on *peshmarga*, while an entire brigade of them was protecting the premises of the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad from attacks by Arab terrorists—al-Qa'ida and Shiite militias. At least one Shiite lawmaker, Ali al-Allaf, member of the Shiite bloc (UIA), stuck out his neck in defense of the Kurds by saying that *peshmarga* units

were carrying out their duties in concert with the Ministry of Defense and, furthermore, they had become part of Iraq's regular defense force but were linked to the KRG.¹³

Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported on August 15, 2008, that Kurdish commanders had refused to pull their four thousand troops out of areas populated by ethnic Kurds, challenging Baghdad's authority. General Nazel Kirkuki, *peshmarga* commander, told reporters that Iraqi army general Ali Ghaidan had asked him, on August 10, to pull his forces out of northern Diyala, which he claimed he had refused unless ordered by his commander-in-chief, Massoud Barzani. Kirkuki stressed, "We have a brigade deployed in the Sa'adiya, Qaratappa and Jalawla districts and we are not budging because so far we've not received orders from [our] presidency to withdraw."¹⁴ He added that his brigade was deployed to the area to restore law and order and that Kurdish *peshmarga* had fought shoulder to shoulder with Iraqi and US forces in many parts of Iraq against Sunni Arab insurgents and al-Qa'ida in Iraq and he did not see why they were being humiliated now.

In an effort to resolve the standoff between Kurdish *peshmarga* and Iraqi forces in Diyala, the KRG dispatched a delegation, led by the KRG deputy president Kusrat Rasoul Ali, to Baghdad on August 15, 2008. Mohammed al-Askari told reporters that the KRG and the central government had agreed that the 34th *peshmarga* brigade, stationed in Diyala, would become part of the Iraqi army in the mountainous regions of Iraq.¹⁵ However, he reiterated the earlier government position by stating that since the *peshmarga* brigade had completed its duties in the Hamreen region of Diyala, it should withdraw to its bases in the autonomous region and make room for the First Iraqi Army Division. According to al-Askari, an agreement was forged between the Kurdish delegation and Prime Minister al-Maliki on August 15 for the *peshmarga* brigade to withdraw from their bases. However, the *peshmarga* brigade did not budge, despite assurances from the central government that Iraqi forces would protect Kurdish political party headquarters and local Kurds from terrorist attacks.¹⁶ The Kurds did not have much faith in the Iraqi army, which was riddled with sectarianism, nepotism, and corruption. Soon after the agreement, a suicide bomber struck the police headquarters in Baquba, capital of Diyala, killing three and wounding three others. Another suicide bomber had earlier struck the same police station, killing one and wounding seventeen, including police officers, indicating that government security units were not prepared to maintain peace and stability in the province.

Under pressure from thousands of protestors, who contended that the area had been very stable and peaceful earlier under *peshmarga*, Iraqi and US forces withdrew from Khanaqin, leaving behind *peshmarga* units. Those who demonstrated against Iraq's army presence in Khanaqin called

for the implementation of Article 140 and normalization of the status of disputed areas, in order to enable them to decide their own fate. The residents of Kifri also demonstrated against the deployment of the Iraqi army in their town and demanded their withdrawal.¹⁷

The district administrator, Mulla Mohammed Hassan, told reporters on August 26, 2008, that a unit of the Iraqi army had already withdrawn from Khanaqin and the remaining soldiers were on their way out.¹⁸ On August 28, Hassan opined that his town was now calmer and that the objective of the army was not as much to apprehend terrorists as to impose themselves on townspeople who rejected their racist behavior.¹⁹

In an effort to control the political fallout of the conflict in Khanaqin, a large delegation from the American Embassy in Baghdad visited Arbil and held discussions with President Barzani and Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani about the rapidly evolving situation in Khanaqin.²⁰ Kurdish officials raised questions about the timing of the Iraqi army's deployment to Khanaqin, backed by the US military. The delegation, led by Thomas Krajeskey, came to explain his government's position regarding the Iraqi troop deployment to Khanaqin and matters related to the implementation of Article 140.²¹ Massoud Barzani asked the delegation why Iraqi army units, backed by US forces, should move to a peaceful town such as Khanaqin, under the pretext of eradicating terrorism and why the central government did not consult the KRG in advance. Barzani hoped that such an incident would not be repeated in the future. Krajeskey claimed that the United States had always supported Article 140 and believed that a strong Kurdistan would strengthen Iraq rather than weakening it, and that troop movements should be coordinated between the federal and regional governments. While assuring Kurdish officials of the United States' continued friendly ties, the delegation stressed that the United States opposed the use of force by the KRG or the central government in settling disputes.²² Mala Bakhtiyar, member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) security force, told the US delegation that KRG had established local administrations in the predominantly Kurdish towns of Khanaqin, Kifri, Kalar, Chamchamal, Qaratappa, and Jalawla in order to protect local residents from al-Qa'ida and insurgent attacks and provide them with basic social services.²³

In a face-saving effort, Ali al-Dabbagh, government spokesman, told reporters that the federal government had the right to send troops to any part of Iraq located outside the jurisdiction of the KRG.²⁴ He said that he was sorry for the rising tension resulting from Iraqi troop deployment to Khanaqin, but insisted that Diyala was outside KRG's jurisdiction and that the government had no intention to send troops to areas where local residents did not want them. Al-Dabbagh claimed that there was no dispute between *peshmarga* and Iraqi troops, implying central government's recognition of *peshmarga* as a legitimate security force.

On July 6, there was another military standoff between *peshmarga* and Iraqi forces in the Kurdish town of Qaratappa in Diyala leading to fist-fights and shooting between the two sides.²⁵ Members of the tripartite US, Iraqi, and *peshmarga* monitoring committee held a meeting following the incident and decided that the Iraqi army should pull out of the area because they had raised tension by mistreating local police and residents. Kamal Abdullah, Qaratappa chief security officer, told reporters that Iraqi troops had arrested his unarmed driver, beaten and tortured him, and that he had to be hospitalized.

KRG Put on a Defensive Mode

In the absence of President Talabani, who was recovering from heart and knee surgeries in the United States, his first vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni Arab, telephoned KRG's president, Barzani, on August 28, 2008, and invited him to an urgent meeting in Baghdad in order to calm the rising tension between Arbil and Baghdad.²⁶ At the end of the meeting, Barzani told reporters that while he agreed with al-Hashimi about the constitutionality of deploying Iraqi troops to disputed areas, he nonetheless questioned the provocative posture of Iraqi army commanders toward the local people and of giving ultimatums to Kurdish *peshmarga* units in Diyala.

Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish lawmaker, claimed that both the US and Iraqi officials created the incident in Khanaqin to press the Kurds to change their stance on the provincial election bill in favor of Arabs and Turkmans and annul Article 140 of the constitution, which prescribed remedies to settle disputes over land claims by Kurds.²⁷ Othman argued that the purpose of deploying Iraqi troops to Khanaqin at such a time was to divert KRG attention from the ongoing heated debate over the provincial election bill, which Arabs and Turkmans wanted to couch in a way to replace Article 140 and which the Kurds considered vital for addressing their claim to Arabized Kurdish land.

Arab and Turkman political factions and their supporters inside and outside Iraq, including the United States and Turkey, started finding holes in the validity of Article 140, especially when the government failed to implement it by the end of the 2007 deadline. The deployment of Iraqi and US forces in Khanaqin appeared to be an integral part of the US and government strategy to firm up the boundaries of the Kurdistan autonomous region along the 36th parallel, which the United States drew in 1991 to create the safe haven zone.

While attending a conference in Tehran, Humam Hammoudi, chief of the Iraqi parliament foreign relation committee, told reporters on August

30, 2008, that Prime Minister al-Maliki had announced that the presence of Kurdish *peshmarga* outside the blue line would be subject to legal action by the federal government.²⁸ He noted that the blue line, 36th parallel, defined the southern boundaries of the safe haven zone.

Sami al-Askari, Defense Ministry spokesman, elevated the standoff with the KRG by stating that al-Maliki had repeatedly warned Kurdish officials that he would deal with *peshmarga* forces outside the blue line as party militias and that the constitution entitles the federal defense force to move to any part of Iraq, including the Kurdish autonomous region.²⁹ He claimed that the constitution defined the boundaries of the Kurdish autonomous region as areas administered by the KRG since March 19, 2003, the date when the US general David Petraeus prevented internally displaced Kurds from returning to homes and farms taken away from them at gunpoint by Saddam Hussein's government. Al-Askari argued that the central government was responsible for the administration of disputed areas until their fate was decided by the constitution. He said that it was wrong and dangerous for the Kurds to consider ethnically mixed areas as part of Kurdistan.³⁰ By 2008 it became clear that the government, supported by Turkey and the United States, had no intention of implementing Article 140.

Efforts to Break Up Kurd-Shiite Alliance

Fu'ad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, told reporters that the deployment of Iraqi troops to Khanaqin, Jalawla, and Qaratappa in the Diyala province was aimed at breaking up the Kurdish-Shiite alliance with unpredictable consequences.³¹ He claimed that members of the Ba'ath Party and their supporters, who started playing an increasing role on the political scene after forging an alliance with the United States during 2007–2008, were now trying to put a wedge between the KRG and the central government. He argued that former and present Ba'athists, backed by invisible hands, coordinated Iraqi troop movements in Arabized Kurdish areas in order to draw the Kurds into confrontation with the federal government. Although he did not specify who the invisible hands were, observers contended that he had meant US officials, who on the one hand told the Kurds that they supported implementation of Article 140 and helped the central government and Sunni Arabs to gain control of Arabized Kurdish territories on the other. He claimed that the Kurds were feeling increasing isolation from the central government, and even the army's chief of staff, Babakr Zebari, a Kurd, was not consulted before Iraqi and US forces were deployed to Khanaqin.³²

Faced with increasing numbers of problems with the central government, Massoud Barzani dispatched a delegation to Baghdad, led by the Iraqi

deputy prime minister Barham Salih, to follow up on his meeting with Vice President al-Hashimi regarding the military standoff in Khanaqin, which kept festering, as well as other outstanding disputes between Arbil and Baghdad. In addition to Salih, the Kurdish delegation included Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister and member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) politburo; Fu'ad Massoum, head of the Kurdistan Alliance in the Iraqi parliament and member of the PUK politburo; and Roj Nouri Shaweis, member of the KDP politburo and lawmaker. Al-Maliki, prime minister and head of al-Da'awa Party, and Adil Abdul Mahdi, Iraqi deputy president and senior member of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), led the central government delegation.

Al-Maliki's spokesman, Yasin Majeed, described the first meeting, held at al-Maliki's home, as frank and transparent.³³ However, in the absence of a joint statement, observers concluded that there must have been deep disagreements between the two sides. Abdul-Karim al-Samarrai, member of the Iraqi Islamic Party, led by Vice President al-Hashimi, told reporters that the Kurds should exercise more flexibility regarding Iraq's troop deployment to Khanaqin and claimed that the Kurds had earlier agreed to relocate their forces to the autonomous region.³⁴ Abbas al-Bayati, a Shiite Turkman and member of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), who had long-standing opposition to *peshmarga* presence in disputed areas, said the Iraqi army was at liberty to move to any part of Iraq.

The dispute over Khanaqin threatened the alliance between the Shiite and Kurdish blocs, who had been close partners throughout the civil war in fighting the Sunni Arab insurgency, and al-Qa'ida. When Sami al-Askari, political advisor to al-Maliki, asked if the dispute over Khanaqin was undermining a future alliance with the Kurds, he merely said that he hoped that would not happen, insisting the government was not ready to sacrifice Iraq's unity for the sake of its alliance with the Kurds.³⁵ The alliance between the Shiite and Kurdish blocs, who did not trust each other, seemed to be an alliance of convenience.

Power Realignment

Al-Maliki was emboldened against the Kurds by his success in cracking down on Shiite militias in the south and Sunni Arab insurgency in the center during the 2008 civil war. His move against the Kurds, backed by United States, was in line with Iraqi Arab nationalists' and neighboring states' opposition to KRG's growing fortunes in Iraq and influence among the Kurds in the Middle East. A report released by *al-Zaman* newspaper said that Tehran had pressed al-Maliki to marginalize the role of the Kurds

in his government, suspend discussions with the United States on the long-term security agreement (SOFA), and dissolve the US-supported al-Sahwa paramilitary program.³⁶

The steady improvement in Iraq's military capability and the weakening of Shiite militias and the Sunni Arab insurgency hardened al-Maliki's stand against the US push for a long-term troop presence in Iraq and Kurdish efforts to reclaim Arabized Kurdish territories in order to improve his nationalist image in advance of the March 2010 election. By September 2, 2008, al-Maliki had weathered most of the 2006–2008 US threats against his government and tried to unite the feuding Shiite political factions behind him.

In an interview on September 2, President Barzani expressed frustration with al-Maliki's reluctance to address a number of long-standing Kurdish grievances ranging from the status of *peshmarga* to controlling regional resources, disputed Kurdish areas, and oil revenue sharing. While backing al-Maliki's government throughout the sectarian violence, Barzani felt increasing isolation as the U.S. and central government gained an upper hand in the south and center.

When Barzani asked if he considered the central government to be a partner, he said while they claim so, there was no evidence to support that claim.³⁷ He said that the Kurds had been al-Maliki's sole partner throughout the sectarian violence and had kept his government alive against threats from the anti-American Sadrists and Sunni Arab insurgents and yet, he had consistently failed to honor his commitments.³⁸ Out of frustration, Barzani said he felt that he still lived under a totalitarian regime dictating orders to its subjects.

Barzani claimed that Arab media had been unfair to the Kurds, who helped liberate and rebuild Iraq's institutions, by distorting facts and accusing the Kurds of separatism. He argued that *peshmarga* went to Khanaqin upon a request from the government and US forces to fill a security gap, purge terrorist presence in the area, and protect the civilian population, not to Kurdify the province, as Arab media alleged. Barzani reiterated that although independence was the natural right of the Kurds and was within their grasp, they chose to remain as part of Iraq.³⁹ He argued that the inclusion of Article 24 in the provincial election bill behind closed doors was another sign that former Ba'athists and anti-Kurd groups were trying to abort implementation of Article 140. Article 24 of the election bill called for resolving the issue of disputed areas through consensus rather than referendum, as stipulated by Article 140.

In an effort to reconcile its differences with Sunni Arabs, the US army and diplomatic corps pressed al-Maliki in 2008 to absorb large numbers of former Saddam Hussein military officers into the new Iraqi army and they were later deployed to disputed Kurdish areas to face their old

nemesis—the Kurds. On August 31, as a further sign of political discord with the KRG, al-Maliki told reporters that he would send his Finance Ministry's auditors to Arbil "to check customs revenues levied by Kurdish officials on the Turkish border."⁴⁰ During 1991–2003 and several years afterward, KRG authorities survived for the most part on customs collected from goods transiting the region from Turkey and Iran to Iraq. As the central government became more confident, it began tightening the screws on its Kurdish partners in order to appease Arab nationalists in advance of the March 2010 elections.⁴¹

Realizing that the ongoing duel between Arbil and Baghdad was harmful to both sides, Barzani and al-Maliki agreed on September 3 to normalize the situation in Khanaqin, where the Kurds accounted for about 85 percent of the population.⁴² A government delegation, led by Babakr Zebari, accompanied by General Ali Ghaidan and other Iraqi military officers, arrived in Khanaqin on September 3, in order to review the security situation first hand.⁴³ The government military delegation met with the KRG delegation, which included Fu'ad Hussein and Khasrow Gul Mohammed, senior PUK member, in order to follow up on the outcome of the agreement reached between al-Maliki and Barzani earlier in Baghdad.

Jabbar Yawur, deputy minister of *peshmarga* affairs, told reporters on September 7 that the Khanaqin incident was a simple matter, magnified by some quarters, implying that Sunni Arab political factions had poured fuel on the fire in order to damage the Arbil-Baghdad relationship.⁴⁴ He announced that the latest Kurdish delegation and government officials had agreed for the army to remain outside the city limit and *peshmarga* to attend to local security matters.⁴⁵

While the central government projected itself to be in control of disputed Kurdish areas, the *peshmarga* remained in their positions but wore police uniforms. The Kurds feared that in the absence of *peshmarga* they might lose total control of disputed areas. The Kurds showed strong resistance to efforts made by al-Maliki who was under Sunni Arab pressure to push *peshmarga* out of these provinces.

Some Sunni Arab political factions, supported by Arab media in Iraq and the Gulf, spread rumors that al-Maliki had started planting Kurdish moles among KRG security units in order to gather intelligence about the KRG's future plans and intention. The *al-Shaq al-Awsat* wrote that the issue of Baghdad's planning to establish an intelligence network in the Kurdish region without the KRG's knowledge was a major topic of discussion among government officials, the media, and the public.⁴⁶ The news broke out that the government was providing its new intelligence recruits with special identification cards that would prevent the KRG from disrupting their work. A number of government agents had sought the cooperation of former Ba'ath Party intelligence officers who were hiding

in Kurdistan to help them collect information.⁴⁷ When General Ahmed Musa, KRG deputy minister of interior, asked if there was any truth to the rumors, he simply said *Asayish* (Kurdish Intelligence) was following up the issue.

While the United States spied on al-Maliki,⁴⁸ al-Maliki spied on coalition forces and his Kurdish allies. Iraqi officials were angered and upset by the news published in one of Bob Woodward's books that the United States had been spying on al-Maliki and his staff. When General Saif al-Din Ali Sharif, director of the Kurdish intelligence (*Asayish*) in Sulaimaniya, was asked about allegations that the central government was spying on the KRG, he said that both sides often exchange information through existing channels and he had no knowledge of the central government's efforts to establish a spy ring in the Kurdistan Region. Ahmed argued that it would damage the relationship between Arbil and Baghdad if such information was proved to be correct.

Pundits believed that the rumors were part of a disinformation campaign carried out by Sunni Arab political factions and their supporters to divide and discredit the US-Iraqi government-KRG alliance against the Sunni Arab insurgency. While al-Maliki tried to subdue the Sunni Arab al-Sahwa militia forces, financed by the United States, he also tried to bring the KRG under his wings. Instead of rewarding the Kurds for their support throughout his first term by exercising flexibility in settling the issue of Arabized Kurdish territories, sharing oil revenue, and recognizing the status of *peshmarga*, al-Maliki tried to weaken the Kurds in favor of Sunni Arabs, who were threatening his government. By the end of 2008, al-Maliki was neither happy with the Kurds, nor with Sunni Arabs, nor with the United States, who tried to force him to take responsibility for paying the salaries of the US-supported al-Sahwa militia and absorbing them into the nascent Iraqi army. Al-Maliki feared that absorbing some ninety thousand al-Sahwa members with uncertain loyalty would destabilize his government.

The Kurdistan Alliance erred by including Barham Salih, Iraqi deputy prime minister, and Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraqi foreign minister, in the delegation they dispatched to Baghdad to negotiate with al-Maliki over the standoff in Khanaqin. The composition of the delegation increased al-Maliki's suspicion of Kurdish members of his cabinet and started questioning their loyalty as evidenced by isolating them from making decisions on issues such as troop deployment to Khanaqin. Al-Maliki retrenched himself into his own small Shiite circle and emboldened Sunni Arab nationalists to conduct sectarian campaigns in order to deepen the rift between Shiite and Kurdish blocs.

While opening the fall 2008 session of the KRP on September 9, the speaker, Adnan Mufti, expressed anxiety over the central government's plan to purchase new military hardware, including advanced fixed wing

fighter jets (F16) from the United States, fearing that they might be used against the Kurds. Mufti sought assurances from Washington and other Western states that the sale of weapons to Iraq should be made conditional that they would not be used against the Kurds.⁴⁹ Fu'ad Hussein told reporters that the government was entitled to purchase such weapons, provided it informs the KRG about the reason and kinds of weapons purchased. He added that the US and government security operations in disputed Kurdish territories should be carried out in consultation with KRG officials and not behind their backs as happened in the cases of passing the provincial election bill and troop deployment to Khanaqin.⁵⁰

Under pressure from the KRG, Iraqi forces were withdrawn from both Khanaqin and Kirkuk. General Abdullah Dalwi told reporters that his troops, who had been deployed from K-1 to the city of Kirkuk on July 28, had been withdrawn to their bases and turned the responsibility for all checkpoints within city limits to local police (Kurdish *peshmarga*) on September 9, as agreed.⁵¹ The police chief, General Sarhad Qadir, told reporters that his force had taken over some 30 checkpoints left behind by the Iraqi army. The US military and diplomatic corps, who had underestimated the KRG's resolve, played a major role in settling the standoff between *peshmarga* and Iraqi forces in order to prevent the situation from exploding.

At a news conference, President Barzani told reporters that he was surprised to learn that some government officials talked about green and blue lines in defining the boundaries of the Kurdistan Region and that there was no question about the Kurdish identity of Khanaqin, Makhmour, and Kirkuk.⁵² Barzani alleged that the conflict in Khanaqin was politically inspired.⁵³ Pundits claimed that the issue of Khanaqin emerged after the Kurds rebelled against Article 24 of the provincial election bill, aimed at annulling Article 140 of the constitution. Mahmoud Othman admitted the KRG did not trust al-Maliki, who had made numerous political, military, security, and economic decisions without consultations with Kurdish officials in his government.⁵⁴

Fu'ad Hussein openly announced sharp differences between the Kurdistan Alliance and the Shiite bloc and the Iraqi Islamic Party, led by al-Hashimi, alleging that their partnership had collapsed due to lack of trust as evidenced by the standoff in Khanaqin and other disputed areas.⁵⁵ There had been no progress on the implementation of the KRG's 19 conditions for supporting al-Maliki's candidature to lead the new government following the March 7, 2010, elections. This lack of progress created more uncertainties about the future of not only *peshmarga* and disputed Kurdish territories but also about the autonomous Kurdish region at large.

Chapter 9

Resistance to Ankara's Pressure to Fight the PKK

Successive Turkish raids into Iraqi Kurdistan during December 2007, followed by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Kirkuk, raised fear among the Kurds that the United States might once again sell them out to Arabs and Turks in order to advance its own national interests. The United States had reached a juncture in the Iraq War to rearrange the balance of power between Sunni Arabs, Shiites, and Kurds. Both Iraqi Arabs and neighboring states, especially Turkey, wanted to see the United States deflate the growing political influence of the Kurds in Iraq.

On December 26, 2007, Turkey's president Abdullah Gul was full of praise for the United States for providing his country with timely military intelligence about the Kurdistan Workers Party—Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK)—movements in Iraqi Kurdistan: "Things are going well at the moment. Our planes hit the targets in an effective air raid."¹ Ankara claimed on December 16, 2007, that they had killed some 150 Kurdish rebels since the United States started providing them with real-time information, gathered by unmanned US drones.

According to chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter, Washington was responsible for protecting Iraq's air space and preventing Turkey's air strikes. Instead, Washington turned a blind eye to Turkey's violation of Iraqi air space, destruction of Kurdish villages, and displacing scores of Kurdish families along its border with Iraq in an effort to press the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to take its side in fighting the PKK.

The Kurds became a liability for the United States when they resisted cooperating with its close Turkish ally to fight the PKK and took an

uncompromising position on disputed Kurdish areas, management of oil resources, oil revenue sharing, and the status of *peshmarga*. Arabs and Turkey, who alleged that the Kurds were seeking independence, pressed the United States to bring them back under central government control. However, since Iraqi Kurds did not want to squander the only opportunity they had in their recent history to break away from Baghdad's direct control, they held on to their political and economic gains steadfastly and had no desire to make major concessions either to Turkey, or to Sunni or Shiite Arabs. Despite their differences, Sunni and Shiite Arabs, supported by Turkey and the United States, were united against Kurd's drive for greater autonomy.²

President Barzani, angered by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who visited the disputed city of Kirkuk without advance consultation with him, cancelled his scheduled meeting of December 18, 2007, with her in Baghdad. Pundits opined that Barzani should have met with Rice and expressed to her his displeasure personally and pressed her to stop Turkey's bombardment of Kurdish border villages.

Despite their unreserved cooperation with US officials and troops in bringing down Saddam Hussein's government and fighting Sunni Arab insurgents, the Bush administration did not commit itself to protecting the Kurds from Turkish raids or Arab attacks aimed at degrading their autonomy. The only statement made on behalf of the Kurds was by the former US president Bill Clinton, who told reporters that if Hillary Clinton, his wife, became the next US president, she

would leave some troops in the Kurdish area in the north, because they [KDP and PUK] have reconciled with each other and they enjoy relative peace and security. And if we leave them . . . not only might they get into civil war . . . the Turks might be tempted to attack them because they don't like the fact that the PKK guerrillas sometimes come across into northern Iraq and hide after staging attacks in Turkey.³

Turkey failed in its concerted efforts to drag the KRG into armed confrontation with the PKK, who sought autonomy for Turkey's Kurds. Having failed to drag the KRG into its war with the PKK, Ankara threatened them with war and bombarded them with insults in an effort to erode their growing political and economic power. Turkish officials often dragged Iraqi Kurdish officials into exchanging harsh and abusive words, unworthy of diplomats. Ultimately, KRG officials tolerated all the indignity from Turkish officials, hoping that Ankara would one day accept them as their next-door neighbors.

While Iraqi and US forces were busy fighting the Sunni Arab insurgency in the center and south of Iraq during the war, Turkish jets and ground

forces continued pounding Iraqi Kurdish villages. On December 23, 2007, Turkish jet fighters penetrated Iraqi Kurdistan skies all the way to the town of Imadiya, next to the Kurdish resort town of Sarsang, claiming that it was bombarding suspected PKK hideouts.⁴ This was the third raid into Iraqi territories within a week, yet Turkey was claiming it respected Iraq's territorial sovereignty. Although the bombardment did not cause major damages, scores of Kurdish families escaped their villages out of fear for their life. In a campaign to terrorize Iraqi Kurds and place them under pressure to yield to their threat, "Turkish military vowed to continue military operations on both sides of Turkish-Iraqi border, no matter how the conditions are."⁵

While admitting that Turkey had alerted them about the raid in advance, Washington made no effort to stop them while the Kurds were performing their religious rites of Eid al-Fitr. Both the United States and Turkey might have coordinated their efforts not only against PKK but also to ratchet up pressure on Iraqi Kurds to yield to Arab and Turkman demands in disputed Kurdish areas, including Kirkuk.

While reviewing the damage done by Turkish fighters to Kurdish villages in Qandil Mountain, President Barzani said that the repeated Turkish military attacks on Iraq's territories were aimed at undermining his government and killing Kurdish people. Barzani told the villagers that Turkish jets and tanks would not be able to kill the determination of the Kurdish people who sought freedom from repression.⁶ While calling on Turkey for peaceful dialogue, he said that the use of force could not be justified for whatever reason Turkey might have.

Mahmoud Othman, Kurdish lawmaker, said that the members of the Kurdistan Alliance insist that the Iraqi government send a letter of protest to the UN Security Council, which is responsible, according to chapter 7 of the UN charter, for preventing repeated Turkish aggression on Iraq.⁷ He alleged that the United States was turning a blind eye to Turkey's aggression against the Kurds in its own interests.

Barzani, accompanied by a large delegation, traveled to the Dukan resort near Sulaimaniya on the occasion of the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Fitr, December 24, 2007, to meet with Iraq's president Talabani concerning the damage done by Turkish air strikes.⁸ In the presence of the vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi, leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), a joint meeting was convened to review the overall security and political situation in Iraq with focus on Turkey's raids into Kurdistan and the implementation of Article 140. At a joint news conference, Talabani said while Turkey had the right of self-defense against the PKK inside Turkey, it had no right to carry out military operations inside Iraq.⁹ Barzani admitted that while his patience was wearing thin in the face of successive Turkish raids, he was unable to stop it.

A UN military advisor in Iraq, Kim Myer, visited the Rawanduz district of Arbil on December 28, 2007, in order to assess the extent of damage and displacement resulting from Turkish raids. The UN delegation met with a number of displaced Kurdish families to whom he promised compensation for some of their losses.¹⁰ The number of families affected by Turkish military raids had reached four hundred by December 28, 2007.

Reporters asked Kurdish officials at a gathering in Arbil on December 27, attended by Talabani and Barzani, and US ambassador Ryan Crocker, if Washington had made any move to stop Ankara's bombing of Kurdish villages; Mulla Bakhtiyar, member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), said, "[Y]es they have sought Ambassador Crocker's help."¹¹ Bakhtiyar added that Kurdish officials have suggested that the conflict should be settled through dialogue and diplomatic channels and not the use of force. He added that the KRG was powerless and demoralized in the face of continued Turkish military attacks. Turkey exploited the security and political vacuum in Iraq during the civil war in order to advance its own national interest, claiming that it had more rights to intervene in Iraq than the Americans, who had come from eight thousand miles to occupy the country.

Despite more than a week of air strikes against their outposts on Qandil Mountain, the PKK launched a massive attack on a Turkish military post inside Turkey on October 3, 2008, a few miles from the Iraqi border, killing 15, wounding many more, and abducting two soldiers.¹² This showed the futility of Turkish air raids and bombardment of suspected PKK targets on Qandil Mountain. The attack led to antigovernment demonstrations in Turkey, demanding that the government take decisive retaliatory measures to end the PKK presence in Iraqi Kurdistan once for all.

While Iraqi Kurds appealed to the United States to stop Turkish raids into their territories, Turkey's General Hassan Igniz told reporters that his government had not received any help from the administration in northern Iraq, meaning KRG, demanding that they describe the PKK as a terrorist organization. On October 3, 2008, Turkish jet fighters resumed attacks on suspected PKK positions on the Qandil Mountain, claiming that they had killed 23 rebel fighters.

Iraqi Kurds were not only fearful that daily Turkish raids might destabilize their region, but were also mindful that Turkey might close their major corridor to Europe. On January 2, 2008, Turkey's security officials detained and seized the passports of a KRG delegation returning from a conference in Finland.¹³ After a grueling 40-hour detention at the airport, Turkey put the delegation on another plane and sent them back to Finland. The Kurdish officials took a different route to return to Iraqi Kurdistan.

While rejecting to be humiliated and intimidated by Turkey, Kurdish officials exercised self-restraint and accorded their next-door neighbor due

respect. During an interview with *BUGUN*, a Turkish newspaper, Barzani recalled Turkish government help and assistance with appreciation in establishing the safe haven (no-fly zone) in northern Iraq in 1991, in order to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussein's army.¹⁴ While stating that he would chose martyrdom as a way to protect the honor of the Kurdish people, he did not think that the language of threat by Ankara would solve any problem. He added that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK enjoyed friendly ties with Turkey during 1991–2003 and wondered why Ankara turned against them following the downfall of Saddam Hussein. He said he was puzzled when a Turkish general, who visited him following the liberation of Kurdistan, told him that the Kurds cannot use the arms they had captured from the Iraqi army against the Turkmans. In response, Barzani had told the general that Turkmans were their friends and neighbors and that they would protect them from outsiders. Barzani told *BUGUN* that Turkish accusations that Iraqi Kurds are supporting the PKK or fighting the Turkmans were groundless and that Kurdistan belonged to all people, not only the Kurds.¹⁵ Barzani wondered how anyone would expect his administration, with meager force, to expel the PKK from the rugged mountain terrain of Qandil, while Turkey had not been able to do so with all its military might since 1980s.

Talabani Tries to Break the Ice

In an effort to promote good neighborly relationship with Ankara, President Talabani telephoned Turkish president Abdullah Gul on October 4, 2008, condemning the PKK attack on Turkey's security force, assuring him that his government would do its utmost to prevent members of the organization attacking Turkey from Iraqi soil.¹⁶ Kurdish officials accused the PKK of creating problems for them while they tried to open a door for them to establish a dialogue with Ankara. While KRG officials offered to mediate between Ankara and the PKK, Turkey wanted them to fight the PKK on their behalf.

US and Kurdish officials' pleas to Turkey to restrain its forces from attacking Kurdish villages and farms appeared to finally yield a dividend, as evidenced by a statement made by President Gul, during his visit to Finland, when he said,

Any authorization for future military operations in north of Iraq would only target the militants. Kurds are a part of Turkey. Turkey embraced the Kurds in north of Iraq when they were attacked by chemical weapons.

Turkey is the country that helped north of Iraq. 4,000 Turkish trucks carried goods to be used by the residents of north of Iraq on daily basis.¹⁷

On October 8, 2008, unidentified gunmen in Diyarbakir attacked a police force, killing 5 security officers and a civilian, and injuring some 20, just a few hours before the Turkish parliament renewed authorization for continued military incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁸ Although there was no immediate claim for the attack, Turkish authorities blamed it on the PKK.

KRG Pursues Confidence-Building Measures With Turkey

Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani told reporters, "Turkey must engage in dialogue if it wants the assistance of the northern Iraqi administration in its fight against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party."¹⁹ In an interview with the Anatolia News Agency, Barzani asked, "How can you help someone who does not talk to you? We do not know what sort of assistance they ask from us because they don't meet with us."²⁰ While it needed KRG's help in its fight against the PKK, Ankara did not recognize Kurdish identity or their regional government. Barzani claimed that recent "terrorist attacks" have also created problems for the Arbil and Baghdad governments and both were doing their best to deprive the PKK from using their airports, hospitals, and territories. He claimed that such attacks and counterattacks would not achieve any political results except complicating the conflict.

The *Turkish Daily News* reported on October 13, 2008, that President Gul had said that his government had decided to intensify discussions with KRG officials in an effort to control the PKK:

There is a new developing period [between Turkey and northern Iraq]. If you look at the Iraqi Kurdish leaders' discourses, you will realize that they also complain about terror too. They have started to describe it as "trouble."²¹ While he avoided mentioning the KRG by name, Gul said Turkey's special envoy had held discussions with Iraq's political blocs, including leaders from the regional administration, implying Iraqi Kurdish political leaders. He reminded the reporters that, "there was a joint [Ankara-Iraqi Kurds] fight against the PKK just like eight or nine years ago."²²

The PUK representative in Ankara, Bahrouz Galali, told reporters that "Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional

Government, could come to Ankara soon for talks," indicating that Turkey was relaxing prohibition against contacts with KRG officials.²³

Turkey dispatched a delegation, led by Murat Ozcelik, Turkish special envoy to Iraq, and Ahmet Davutoglu, foreign policy advisor to Turkish prime minister Erdogan, to meet with the KRG president Barzani in Baghdad instead of Arbil. During a two-hour meeting on October 14, 2008, Turkish politicians pressed Barzani to crackdown on the PKK by cutting off their communication lines, hospital, and airport services and by arresting and delivering their leaders to Ankara.²⁴

The arrival of the Turkish delegation to Baghdad coincided with Barzani's visit to the capital to settle a number of outstanding issues with the central government, including disputed Kurdish areas, oil contracts, revenue sharing, and the status of *peshmarga*. While Ozcelik told reporters that he had "communicated to the other side its suggestions concerning security," Fu'ad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, said that the meeting had discussed "bilateral relations."²⁵ KRG officials claimed that they had reminded Turkish officials that they had no means of dislodging the PKK from their high, rugged Qandil Mountain with difficult terrain and suggested that since Ankara had failed to defeat the PKK by the use of force since 1984 they should resolve the conflict through dialogue.

From October 2007 to October 2008, Turkey launched frequent air raids and cross-border incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan to no avail. After each raid, Turkish army spokesman claimed that they had destroyed all major PKK bases and killed hundreds of their fighters, yet the guerilla warfare continued. The October 3, 2008, and follow up attacks by PKK fighters proved the validity of suggestions made by Iraqi Kurds—who did not want to engage in bloodletting with their brethren on behalf of Turkey—that the conflict should be settled through dialogue. While Ozcelik was meeting with Barzani in the Green Zone, heavily protected government and foreign diplomatic headquarters in Baghdad during Iraq's civil war, the Turkish military was pushing for the passage of legislations that would authorize expanded military, economic, and social measures in dealing with the PKK.²⁶

Despite its diplomatic engagement with the KRG, Ankara continued pressing Iraq's political factions and the United States to help them uproot the PKK from Qandil Mountain. The US military and Iraqi government had no desire or resources to shift focus from Iraq's security problems during the war to helping Ankara in its fight against the PKK. Instead, US and Iraqi officials pressed Barzani to send his *peshmarga* to fight the PKK on Qandil Mountain. Once it became clear to Ankara that Barzani was not carrying arms against the PKK, Turkey's prime minister Erdogan shifted gears by telling reporters, "We are in a process

of working with the central Iraqi administration, the United States and the northern Iraq local administration. In the past, there was a mistake in not taking this step.”²⁷

However, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), alleged the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Erdogan of falling

into a new trap by Barzani, who wants to have Turkey’s approval to legitimize his presence in the north of Iraq. Bahçeli alleged that Barzani had suckered the Turkish government into a global game. He opined that the new Turkish policy would either split Iraq into three parts, by recognizing the northern Iraqi administration, transgressing red lines it had drawn in order to expel the PKK from the north of Iraq, or it will expose itself to continued PKK cruel attacks under Barzani’s direction.²⁸

Bahçeli accused Nihat Ergun, an AKP lawmaker, of making separatist propaganda for the PKK in order to turn Gavur [infidel] Mountain, implying Qandil Mountain, into their home. Deniz Baykal, leader of the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), accused the ruling AKP of making desperate official contacts with northern Iraq in an effort to deal with the PKK terrorist attacks.²⁹

The KRG president Barzani noted Turkish officials did not bring up the issue of the PKK during their meeting in Baghdad, but did open the path for dialogue with Iraqi Kurds, stating, “We demolished the walls between us with Turkey . . . to improve ties. We would like to be in dialogue, not only in the fight against the PKK and regarding security issues, but in broader scope. We welcome any invitation from Turkey.”³⁰ Babakr Zebari, Iraq’s top military commander and a Kurd, said that the problem of “PKK bases in northern Iraq can only be solved if Turkey establishes ties with the regional administration [KRG]. Barzani would respond positively to every measure taken against the PKK if the Turkish government established a dialogue with him.”³¹

In response to pressure by Barzani, the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire on the occasion of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adhha. However, Turkey and Iran met the PKK’s unilateral goodwill gesture with extensive shelling of their bases on Qandil Mountain on December 8, 2008. A Turkish military website released a statement stating that Turkish jets had hit PKK targets on Qandil Mountain successfully and that they had returned to their bases safely.³² While Turkey used warplanes to bombard the Iraqi side of the border, Iran shelled remote Kurdish villages in the northeast of Iraqi Kurdistan, where PJAK, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan, a sister organization of the PKK, operated.

Fighting Kurdish Unrest through Economic Development

Despite the US and Iraqi governments' resistance to being dragged into Turkey's fight with the PKK, Turkey succeeded in drawing them into a trilateral security arrangement in November 2008 in order to tighten the screws on PKK movements.³³ In a speech delivered in Washington, Ali al-Dabbagh, Iraq's government spokesperson, said that Iraq was promoting a regional economic and security partnership with Turkey, Iran and Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. He claimed the plan was aimed at building roads from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean shores, improving oil and gas transport pipelines, initiating joint economic projects, removing trade barriers, fighting terrorism, and resolving border disputes.³⁴ He added that the plan was the Iraqi government's "official vision aimed at easing the isolation felt by Kurds, scattered throughout Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran, and addressed Sunni Arab minority concerns in Iraq and Arab minorities living in Turkey and Iran."³⁵ He added, the plan would also ensure the long-oppressed Shiite majority in Iraq, "who are now the most powerful group, are not seen as a threat in the region."³⁶

The Iraqi government's vision for the region turned into a pipe dream during the Syrian uprising in 2011, when Iraq and Iran took sides with the Syrian government against Syrian opposition groups, supported by Turkey and Gulf states. As for the Kurds, they felt that the perceived Iraqi plan was similar to the Baghdad Pact of the 1950s, under which the neighboring states oppressed their Kurdish populations, who sought freedom from political and cultural discrimination. Observers noted that the Shiite-dominated government was now trying to solidify Saddam Hussein's Arabization of Kurdish territories into a reality on the pretext of fighting terrorism.

As much as Turkey wanted to destroy the PKK, it wanted to exploit the opportunities created by the war in Iraq to advance its political and economic interests, hoping that support for the PKK would fizzle out as economic prosperity spread and new employment opportunities were created for Kurdish youth. The AKP, led by Erdogan and Gul, was in the process of breaking away from the traditional Kemalist politics of integration with Europe in order to pursue greater wealth and power in the neighboring Muslim countries. While not abandoning dreams of becoming an EU member, Turkey wanted to do it on its own terms, by first consolidating its regional political and economic power base.

Pundits who claimed in 2002 that Turkey's refusal to offer the United States a second corridor to invade Iraq would adversely affect its political and commercial interests turned out to be doomsday predictors. In the presence of anti-Kurd sentiment in Turkey and Iraq, Ankara became a center of gravity for Sunni and Shiite Arabs, bidding against each other and the Kurds. Turkey, as a NATO partner, played a stabilizing role in the war by containing Iraqi Kurds, whom the United States and Arabs feared might declare independence and broaden the scope of the civil war in Iraq. Common interests against the Kurdish drive for greater autonomy brought Arabs and Turks closer together, creating new political and economic opportunities for Turkey in Iraq. Despite the latest row between Ankara and Baghdad over the Syrian uprising in 2011, Turkey's construction companies and investors continued doing lucrative businesses in Iraq.

The 2003 war also helped Turkey to consolidate its three modest military and monitoring camps in Iraqi Kurdistan and arm its Turkman proxies in order to check Iraq's Kurdish national ambitions, especially in disputed Kurdish areas such as Kirkuk. While Turkey used direct military threats to contain the KRG, it encouraged its Turkman proxies to align themselves with Arab political factions to block implementation of Article 140 of Iraq's constitution prescribing remedies to address the issue of disputed Kurdish areas.

Instead of overtly occupying Iraqi Kurdistan militarily, Ankara was able to dominate it economically and politically by 2009. Ahmet Barcek, advisor to Turkey's Ministry of Trade and members of a Turkish delegation in Arbil, met Ali Sindi, KRG minister of planning, during a trade fair in Arbil on December 13, 2009, and discussed ways and means to hold similar fairs in the future in order to further expand trade between the two sides.³⁷ Barcek claimed some 170 Turkish companies had participated in the industrial and construction fair held in December 2009. Sindi opined that the environment was conducive for Turkish companies to make more investments and to play a greater role in the development of the region. He added that the trade in industry, manufacturing, and construction between the two sides had reached about seven to eight billion dollars in 2009.³⁸

Dangir Mir Mehmet, a Kurdish Turkish lawmaker and member of the ruling party AKP, told reporters in Arbil on December 20, 2009, that the impact of the democratic initiative of his party on different segments of Turkey's population has been considerable. He stressed the significance of lifting the martial law and allowing broadcasting of Kurdish songs, practicing Kurdish culture, and opening Kurdish radio and TV channels on the population of the region. He added that Kurdology departments

would be established at universities in Ankara, Istanbul, and Mardin.³⁹ While welcoming Mehmet, Barzani said that such visits by him and other Turkish officials would strengthen ties between the two sides and was a courageous step by the Turkish government to resolve conflicts through peaceful means. He added that in contrast to earlier Turkish governments, AKP has played a superior role in its openness policy at the local, regional, and international levels.⁴⁰

In 2007, Peter W. Galbraith claimed in his *Unintended Consequences*, "Iran is the major beneficiary of the American-induced changes in Iraq since 2003."⁴¹ However, Turkey, not Iran, turned out to be reaping the benefits of the war by exploiting Iraqi Kurdistan's potential for development and using the region as a launching pad into the rest of Iraq and the Persian Gulf, competing with Iran in its own backyard. While Iran's influence among Iraqi Shiites had increased, Turkey's direct role in Iraq's political and economic spheres was more conspicuous. Ankara became the Mecca for not only Shiite political factions but also Sunni Arabs and Kurds, who sought Ankara's favor in order to keep ahead of each other. In the process, Turkey used its new power to maximize its own national interests, not those of Iraq's political factions per se, by playing one side against the other.

While claiming it stood the same distance from all political factions in Iraq, Turkey supported Sunni Arabs covertly. Turkey extended its political, economic, and cultural interests into all aspects of life in Iraqi Kurdistan, turning it into its next-door colony, where thousands of Turkish investors, traders, contractors, and workers felt at home. While pursuing its economic interests, Ankara nevertheless did not abandon its opposition to PKK or Iraqi Kurdish national ambitions.

Citing a *New York Times* article of November 12, 2009, the *Hurriyet Daily News* stated, "Turkey is one of the countries to have come out a winner in Washington's Iraq debacle," and the United States had "come out the worst."⁴² Turkey became the decider not only over the future status of Kurdish disputed areas, but also on Iraqi politics in Baghdad, by supporting Sunni Arabs against Shiite political factions during and following the March 2010 elections, which was unworthy of a neutral arbitrator.

Yet, the Iraqi government rewarded Turkey for its role in containing Iraqi Kurds by opening its door to Turkish goods and contractors, giving them a role to play in developing Iraq's lucrative oil industry in Badra, predominated by Faily Kurds in the southeastern province of Kut. The level of trade between Iraq and Turkey climbed from less than two billion dollars prior to 2003 to seven to eight billion dollars in 2009, including Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴³

Talabani Travels to Ankara to Mend Fences

In response to an invitation from Turkish president Gul, immediately following the Turkish military incursion into Iraqi Kurdistan on February 21, 2008, President Talabani paid a two-day visit to Ankara on March 7–8, 2008. He was accompanied by a large delegation, including Hussein al-Shahristani, minister of oil; Baqir Jabr al-Zubaidy, minister of finance; Abdul Latif Jamal Rashid, natural resources' minister; Fawzi Hariri, minister of mineral industry; Labid Abawi, deputy foreign minister; Naseer al-Ani, presidential chief of staff; Ali al-Dabbagh, government spokesman; and Adnan al-Dulaimi, leader of the Sunni Arab Iraqi Accordance Front.⁴⁴

In view of strong objections from Turkish generals, Talabani's visit was turned into a nonofficial working visit. Low-ranking government officials such as Turkey's deputy prime minister Cemil Cicek received Talabani at the airport, merely because he was a Kurd. Talabani deflected the diplomatic snub by saying that the purpose of his visit was to open a new chapter in relationship between Iraq and Turkey and to ensure closer cooperation between the two countries in dealing with the PKK, Turkey's core concern.

While Gul expressed his concerns about Iraq's territorial integrity, unity, and stability, Murat Ozcelik, Turkey's envoy in Baghdad, told Talabani and his delegation that Turkey insisted on preventing the PKK from making northern Iraq its permanent base. Ozcelik claimed that after a week-long operation in northern Iraq, his country was in a stronger position and had received positive signals from the central and the regional governments that they now better understand that the PKK is a joint and not only a Turkish problem.⁴⁵ Ozcelik said that Turkey looked forward to boosting ties with Iraq in the oil sector and was eagerly awaiting the approval of the new Iraqi oil law, which he claimed had been blocked by Kurdish demand for a larger role in oil exploration.

In addition to dominating Kurdistan's market, Turkey wanted to establish a consulate in Basra in order to expand its business interests. Turkey eyed some of the lucrative reconstruction and oil exploration opportunities in the south, where Iran had an extensive presence.⁴⁶ Turkey's businessmen and industrialists urged their government "not to stand idly by while Iran loosens its purse strings in order not to miss business opportunities in Iraq during its restructuring process."⁴⁷ Turkish businessmen eyed some of the \$180 billion infrastructure projects planned for the following five years in Iraq.

Turkey's energy minister, Hilmi Guler, who met with Iraq's oil minister, Hussein al-Shahristani, during Talabani's visit to Ankara said that he

had discussed building a second pipeline from Iraq's northern oil fields of Kirkuk to the port of Yumurtalik in southern Turkey. Al-Shahristani claimed that Iraq would be a reliable Turkish partner in the field of energy. Turkey's entrepreneurs encouraged their government to emulate Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when he granted Iraq one billion dollars during his visit to Baghdad in early March 2008 toward technical cooperation, focusing on developing energy, electricity, and related industries. The Turkish-Iraq Council chairman, Ercument Aksoy, and chairman of the Turkish-Middle East Business Council, Mehmet Habbab, told reporters that the south of Iraq was the richest industrial part of the country, involving billions of dollars worth of tenders.

KRG spokesman Jamal Abdullah told reporters that Talabani would discuss the PKK file in Ankara by encouraging Turkey to create better economic opportunities for its Kurdish population and by improving democratic practices and constitutional reforms.⁴⁸ The low-level reception accorded Talabani and Turkish military generals' refusals to receive him at the airport or provide him with the same courtesy granted other heads of states was an insult to Iraqi people, especially the Kurds. Pundits attributed Turkish officials' behavior to the unwillingness of the Iraqi and regional Kurdish governments to push the PKK fighters out of Qandil Mountain.

While Turkey invaded and destroyed Iraqi Kurdistan's infrastructure along the border during eight days of sustained bombardment and shelling, they humiliated and disgraced Talabani who had traveled to Ankara to allay their concerns about the PKK. *The Turkish Daily News* wrote on March 10, 2008, that the purpose of Talabani's visit to Ankara was "fence-mending . . . following the Turkish military's cross-border operation into northern Iraq last month [February 2008]."⁴⁹ Talabani told reporters, "Iraq wants strategic and solid relations with Turkey," and "was continuing to put pressure on Kurdish rebels to lay down their arms or leave the area."⁵⁰ Gul warned that Turkey would not tolerate those who engage in terrorism and called on the PKK fighters to lay down their arms. Turkey was also concerned about the emerging autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq and its efforts to absorb the oil-rich Kirkuk, fearing that might encourage its own Kurdish population to demand the same rights and benefits.

While Turkey rejected sitting down with PKK rebels at the same table, Admiral William Fallon, commander of the US Central Command (Centcom), stated on March 5, 2008, "Turkey's Kurdish problem would not be resolved through military methods only and called for a political solution. We certainly recognize the pain the Turks have felt from the outlawed and terrorist activities of the group [PKK], but we know that long-term solution is some kind of accommodation, to scratch some of the itches of the PKK."⁵¹

At a briefing in the Pentagon a day earlier, Lt Gen. Ray Odierno, former commander for operations in Iraq, who had ended his 15-month tour in Iraq on February 18, 2008, opined, "Obviously there's pressure that has to be put on them [PKK] so we can start to talk and have negotiations with these terrorist elements."⁵² Although the United States had long advocated political means to address the PKK issue, the remarks made by Admiral Fallon and General Odierno irritated Turkish officials.

To allay Turkey's concerns, the White House spokeswoman, Dana Perino, told reporters,

We have encouraged dialogue and coordination between the United States, Turkey and Iraq, but we have not and we will not negotiate or hold talks with the PKK, nor do we expect Turkey to do so. As we have said before, the PKK is a common enemy. We have been strongly supporting Turkey in its efforts to combat the PKK. We are encouraged by the continued diplomatic discussion that is ongoing between the governments of Iraq and Turkey that they continue to try to strengthen their ties as well as to work together to beat back the PKK.⁵³

The State Department spokesperson, Tom Casey, expressed satisfaction about Talabani's visit to Ankara and its outcome.

Ankara's Stick-and-Carrot Game

After a protracted boycott of the KRG, Turkey sent a delegation, led by Murat Ozelik, to Duhok to hold a meeting on March 28, 2008, with the governor of Duhok province and KDP's foreign relations director, Safin Dizayee.⁵⁴ The Turkish delegation later traveled to Baghdad and then to Basra to make arrangements for the opening of a Turkish consulate that would promote commercial ties between the two countries. However, the delegation shortened the duration of its visit to Basra due to escalating clashes between government and Shiite militia forces of al-Sadr. Before returning to Ankara, the Turkish delegation met with KRG officials in Mosul concerning sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Turks, especially in the district of Tal Afar.

On March 29, 2008, Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan repeated Turkey's familiar position, "If the administration in the north of Iraq [KRG] distances itself from PKK and reaches the conclusion that the PKK is an element that must be eradicated and if we see action, there is no doubt that our relations [with Iraqi Kurds] will take a different course."⁵⁵ Babacan claimed that Iraqi Kurds had failed to do what they were supposed to have

done and that the Turkish ground and aerial operations might convince them that they should face reality. He stressed that Turkey did not have a hidden agenda and will do what it takes to protect its citizens.

During their meeting on April 24, 2008, Turkey's National Security Council (MGK), consisting of top political and military leaders, agreed to establish dialogue with all of Iraq's political factions, including the Kurds.⁵⁶ Hasim Hasimi, former Turkish lawmaker, told reporters that he felt a change in the political atmosphere "when Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli invited the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party's (DTP) Hasip Kaplan to sit beside him. Bahçeli might criticize the DTP, but he doesn't disregard them—an important nuance for the Kurds."⁵⁷

Ali Babajan told reporters, "We'd like to establish a strategic dialogue mechanism as soon as possible that will be chaired by the prime ministers of the two countries [Turkey and Iraq]" and that a delegation will be dispatched to Iraq for "talks with their interlocutors to prepare a suitable ground for the establishment of the planned dialogue mechanism."⁵⁸ He added, "We have had some difficulties [with Iraqi Kurds] over the PKK terrorist organization. But in the coming days, you can expect increasing contacts on various levels with the administration of northern Iraq."⁵⁹

Turkey initially did not recognize the KRG's political status and rejected holding direct talks with its officials but they later decided that it was in their interest to sit down with them in conjunction of discussions with the government in Baghdad. A Turkish delegation, led by Ahmet Davutoglu, senior advisor to Prime Erdogan, and Murat Ozelcik met with the Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki, and then visited President Talabani, where the KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, met with members of the Turkish delegation on May 1, 2008.⁶⁰ Talabani said he was pleased to see a friendly encounter between Turks and members of the Kurdistan government: "It is important for Turkey to strengthen ties with not only the central Iraqi government but also the Kurdish government."⁶¹ After leaving Talabani's office, members of the Turkish and KRG officials held a meeting focusing "on strategic relations between the two sides and means to end the PKK threats on border regions."⁶² The two sides prepared a laundry list of political, economic, social, and security issues to be addressed.

While describing the discussion as being cordial and frank, Barzani said the Turkish delegation had not raised the PKK issue during the meeting. However, Babacan had earlier told reporters, "If they [Iraqi Kurds] manage to put a distance between them and the PKK and assure a strong position through concrete steps, this situation will undoubtedly influence the quality and density of our dialogue with the local administration in the north."⁶³

The Turkish delegation to Baghdad told Nechirvan Barzani, "Continuation of the policy of engagement was conditional on the KRG's distancing itself from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)."⁶⁴ The Turkish delegation threatened Barzani that Turkey would terminate its engagement policy "unless Iraqi Kurds isolate the PKK, sever its supply lines, prevent militants from moving around freely in northern Iraq, suppress the PKK's propaganda outlets and generally distance themselves from the organization."⁶⁵ A few hours after the meeting, Turkish fighter jets pounded suspected PKK positions in Qandil Mountain for about two hours. This was a follow up to intensive land and aerial bombardment of Iraqi Kurdistan border villages during April 25–26, 2008.⁶⁶

Turkey's interests in Iraq lay in the energy sector, commerce, fighting the PKK, and preventing Iraqi Kurds from splitting from Iraq. According to KRG foreign affairs director, Falah Mustafa, "This is the first time a meeting has taken place between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan government. This is a positive step. We discussed all of the political and economic issues and we agreed to hold further meetings in the future."⁶⁷

President Barzani tried to allay Ankara's concerns about KRG's independence ambitions by saying that the Kurds "have opted to become a part of Iraq and do not plan secession."⁶⁸ Barzani told a visiting delegation of Kurdish lawyers from Diyarbakir province, Turkey, that Kurds should adjust their mindset from violence to peaceful and diplomatic approach to achieving their objectives. By exploiting its close ties with the United States and strong relations with Iraq's Sunni Arab nationalists, Turkey pressed Iraqi Kurds to surrender their strife for independence at least in the near future.

The *Eurasia Daily Monitor* reported on May 3, 2008, "Turkey had offered to provide training to the Iraqi army as part of an attempt to strengthen the central government in Baghdad and prevent the breakup of the country."⁶⁹ Ankara feared that in the event of Iraq's break up during the civil war, the KRG would be the first to declare independence because it already had its own army, police force, functioning government institutions, and flourishing economy.

Although the new Iraqi constitution recognized northern Iraq as the Kurdistan Region and its government as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), yet Turkish officials continued referring to it as northern Iraq as Arab nationalists did. Turkey had forbidden words "Kurd" and "Kurdistan" from its maps and dictionaries and now was trying to impose the same on Iraqi Kurds. The Turkish media sounded like the mouthpiece of the Turkish government when it came to mentioning Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷⁰

Since their meeting with the Turkish delegation in Baghdad, Kurdish officials started using a softer touch in expressing their national sentiment and identity. For example, while talking about their meeting with the Turkish delegation, Falah Mustafa told reporters on May 6, 2008, they discussed the issue of border security, the PKK, and the role of Turkish companies in the Kurdish region, as an integral part of Iraq and not as a federal entity.⁷¹ He was of the opinion that the meeting was a step forward in his government's relationship with Turkey. In reality, Turkey tried to deprive Iraqi Kurds of their liberty to express their views freely.

While Turkey intensified ground and aerial attacks on PKK positions inside Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkish officials established mechanisms for dialogue with the KRG, which came as a shift in Turkey's foreign policy toward KRG.⁷² Turkey was now openly using air strikes against the PKK inside Iraq as a diplomatic stick in dealing with KRG.

A day following the arrival of Ozcelik to Baghdad, May 1, 2008, Ahmet Turk, leader of the a pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), told reporters that DTP was trying to end the PKK violence, which was harming the Kurdish cause and reinforcing the Turkish military hand.⁷³ Turk told reporters that the PKK leaders had told them they would end armed struggle if a concrete political project were found. Turk, who led a pro-Kurdish parliamentary delegation of the DTP during the second of May 2008, had earlier met with Talabani and discussed ways to end the PKK conflict. Hasip Kaplan, the DTP Sirnak deputy, who accompanied Turk in the meeting with Talabani, echoed Turk's statement that the "conflict harms Turkey, its people, peace, brotherhood and democracy."⁷⁴ The DTP had drawn criticisms from Turkish officials for refusing to condemn the PKK's use of violence as a mean for attaining Kurdish objectives. Talabani had told Ahmet Turk that they should solve the conflict through diplomatic and political channels. Turkey tried to bring Iraqi Kurds to its side in order to neutralize the Kurdish movement in Turkey by defeating the PKK, which it described as a terrorist organization and not representing Turkey's Kurds.

As a member of NATO and a close American ally, Ankara was able to blacklist the PKK as a terrorist organization in the West, while others described them as a political organization, seeking the civil and human rights of their people. Turkey silenced its Kurdish political organizations and nationalists, who demanded recognition of their ethnic identity and equality with Turks, by accusing them of being terrorists or sympathizers of terrorist organizations. Despite the lingering PKK conflict, the KRG developed working relationships with Turkey in order to establish peace and stability in their region.

Chapter 10

Shift in Turkey's Narrative toward Iraqi Kurds

The change in Turkey's diplomatic maneuvers in Iraq came following President Abdullah Gul's meeting with US president George W. Bush in the White House in early 2008. Pundits noted that during their meeting in the White House, Bush must have given Turkey's Gul *carte blanche* to pursue his country's security and commercial interests in Iraq, conditional on not destabilizing the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-administered region in the north. Some US analysts argued that allowing Turkey to establish strong political and economic roots in Iraq would serve both Turkish and US strategic interests in the Middle East.¹ Turkey's growing influence in Iraq was to contain not only the Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK) and KRG's growing political stature, but also Iran's influence in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

Until early 2009, Ankara had portrayed Barzani "as a cocky tribal upstart," who was emboldened by the US support and was plotting against Turkey.² Turkey's hawkish generals often threatened the Kurds with war if they ever contemplated independence or grabbed Kirkuk or harmed their Turkman proxies. Barzani vowed to fight back against any attempt by Turkey to invade Iraqi Kurdistan.

A little over a year after Talabani's March 7, 2008, visit to mend fences with Ankara, President Abdullah Gul traveled to Baghdad on March 23, 2009, "the first such visit in more than three decades."³ On his way to Baghdad, Gul told reporters on board his plane that

Iraq needs to quash the terrorist organization [PKK] and only then will it get 100 percent cooperation from its neighbors. The Kurds should understand

the importance of winning and losing Turkey. The northern Iraqi administration should take the necessary steps regarding the PKK. This visit is a very important gesture showing our support for Iraq. Everyone should do his best in the fight against terrorists. Continuing PKK presence in northern Iraqi territory, this region would eventually turn into a no-man's land.⁴

When asked why he avoided referring to northern Iraq as Kurdistan, he said, "It is whatever the Iraqi constitution says it is [Kurdistan]."⁵ President Gul's remark was a positive signal to Iraqi Kurds that better days were still ahead.⁶ During their meeting in Baghdad, both presidents Gul and Talabani pledged to fight the PKK and expel them from Qandil Mountain. At a joint news conference and after signing a trade agreement, Gul stressed that his country supports Iraq's stability at all levels and that Iraq had passed through very difficult times.⁷ On his part, Talabani said that the PKK should either lay down their arms or leave Iraq.

In addition to meetings with Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani, and prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, Gul also received the KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, in Baghdad on March 24, 2009, during which they discussed security, political, economic, and cultural issues.⁸ It was the first time a Turkish leader met formally with a KRG official, whom they had accused of sheltering the PKK. Following a meeting discussing pending issues between Arbil and Baghdad, al-Maliki and Barzani met with Gul and bade him farewell at the Baghdad airport.⁹

Paul de Bender wrote in the *Gulf Times* that a senior Turkish official had noted that "[t]he visit was a public gesture. We now expect cooperation to speed up between Turkey and northern Iraqi authorities. But results won't happen overnight."¹⁰ Although Turkish officials had avoided making any reference to the KRG by name, Gul's meeting with Prime Minister Barzani was an acknowledgment of the region's official existence, which had enjoyed autonomy since 1991.

The religiously rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was more conciliatory toward Turkey's Kurds than any other Turkish political parties since it came to power in 2002. The AKP agreed to establish a Kurdish television station and consider the idea of translating Qur'an into Kurdish in an apparent attempt to draw the Kurds away from their nationalist ambition. The Turkish journalist, Mehmet Ali Birand, with firsthand knowledge of the Kurdish question, said Gul's trip and its "results are proof that Turkey is seeking stability in the region" and "is not just lip service."¹¹ Gul said that it was timely to address the region's problems through peaceful means, committing Turkey to a more flexible approach to the Kurdish question, recognizing the KRG and pressing Iraqi Kurds to take a more active role

to end the PKK armed activities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkish leaders might have finally realized that the continued conflict with the PKK and the denial of KRG existence were harmful to regional stability and economic prosperity.

Instead of physically carving out their share of the Iraqi territory, the neighboring states tried to divide Iraq into spheres of influence. Turkey's objective of imposing its hegemony on Iraqi Kurds was to counterbalance the increasing influence of the neighboring Sunni Arab states in central Iraq and of Iran in Iraq's Shiite south. Gul told reporters, "Once the PKK is eliminated there are no bounds to what is possible: you are our neighbors and kinsmen."¹² Turkish officials took their anti-PKK crusade to every occasion they had in order to make their position clear to their friends and foe.

In advance of Gul's visit to Iraq, Turkey's prime minister Erdogan told the official Turkish *ATV* that no one could predict with certainty what might happen in Iraq, but its people were dangerously divided along religious and ethnic lines, which might lead to another civil war and Iraq's division, which Turkey did not want to witness.¹³ It might have been for this reason that Turkey tried to strengthen its foothold in Iraq's Kurdistan before the country fragmented. However, after a sharp fall in the level of violence and successful January 2009 provincial elections in Iraq, many international analysts, except Erdogan, concluded that Iraq had passed the danger point of disintegrating. Many observers were surprised to hear Erdogan talking about Iraq's possible disintegration.

Erdogan said that Turkey had spoken with all Iraqi groups and government officials about the importance of regional security, and did not share Talabani's optimism and stance on terrorism and his hopes that PKK fighters will soon lay down their arms.¹⁴ He claimed to have told Talabani that Turkey would do its part in implementing a counterterrorism plan that he was preparing.¹⁵ Turkey encouraged Kurdish political organizations from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran to hold a conference in Arbil that would call on Kurdish armed groups to lay down their arms and participate in the development of the region, but said it was important to clear northern Iraq from PKK armed groups. However, Erdogan failed to understand that Turkey's Kurdish population struggled for autonomy and recognition as a distinct ethnic group and not economic prosperity per se.

The pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey were critical of Talabani for turning the idea of Arbil conference scheduled for May 2009 into a mechanism to pressure the PKK to lay down their arms. The Democratic Society Party (DTP) vice president Selahattin Demirtas announced, "As the DTP, we are disturbed by the agenda of the conference," which focuses on the liquidation of the PKK and the creation of chaos and therefore we

"do not want to take part in this chaos."¹⁶ He said the PKK would reject ultimatums and seek democratic solutions to the Kurdish issue, including "a general pardon in Turkey, putting different cultures and identities under the protection of a constitution, and actualizing democratic autonomy."¹⁷

Turkish officials rejected such conditions and demanded that the PKK lay down their arms first and only then the government will do what it sees fit to democratize the country. Demirtas said that DTP supports a conference that would solve the Kurdish issue in the Middle East and does not support the present conference, which he said "was known as a U.S. plan," aimed at liquidating the PKK.¹⁸ KRG officials told reporters that they had extended invitations to Kurdish political parties in the Middle East, including the PKK, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), the Participatory Democracy Party (KADEP), and Rights and Liberties Party (HAKPAR).¹⁹

While attending the Fifth World Water Forum in Istanbul on March 20, 2009, President Talabani expressed appreciation for past Turkish support by stating, "Turkish military had armed the [Iraqi] Kurds and offered them logistical support including transit with helicopters during the tough times of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein."²⁰ He emphasized that he had called on all Kurdish political organizations from Turkey, Syria, and Iran to attend the Arbil conference and urged them to lay down their arms and settle their disputes with their governments through dialogue and in a democratic spirit. He also said that Kurdish political organizations, including the PKK, must understand "the time of partisan warfare is over" and that they should explore during the Arbil conference how to end the armed struggle by the PKK, which was "listed as a terrorist group by Ankara and much of the international community."²¹ However, the PKK and some other Kurdish organizations disagreed with Talabani's assertions and turned down his invitation. Consequently, the idea of the conference was discarded.

Seven journalists aboard President Gul's plane to Baghdad reported, "Gul had become the first Turkish official to describe the northern Iraqi administration as Kurdistan," and as the main actor in the ongoing "efforts to end the terror activities against Turkish territory."²² Turkish officials did not recognize the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq by its official name, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and had denied in the past the existence of ethnic Kurds and Kurdistan in order to dissuade Iraqi Kurds from declaring independence. On the way back to Ankara, Gul told reporters that although he had not used the term "Kurdistan," "[t]here is a regional Kurdish administration in the north of Iraq according to the Iraqi constitution. This is what I said. I held a meeting with the (regional administration's) prime minister."²³

Erdogan Announces Improving Ties with the KRG

The *Hurriyet Daily News* reported on September 18, 2009, that Prime Minister Erdogan had declared, "Turkey will improve its relations with the northern Iraqi administration in a very different way" and that, "both Iraq and Syria were supportive of the Turkish democratic opening program toward the Kurds."²⁴ However, Erdogan warned that his party would not allow any quarter to derail the process and that they aimed to "strengthen national unity and solidarity and pledged to maintain the process without making concessions of democracy, law and brotherhood."²⁵ In the absence of specifics, it was difficult for observers to understand what Erdogan meant by his vague statement.

Others believed that Turkey was trying to flush the PKK out of the Qandil Mountain through sweet talk and to seek the Syrian government's help in offering them sanctuary, then to start arresting them at will. The PKK leaders rejected the idea of seeking sanctuary in Syria, because Syria had pushed them out in late 1999, under pressure from Ankara, leading to the capture of their leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in Kenya. Turkey's court sentenced Ocalan to life and jailed him in Imrali Island.

Pundits claimed that the bold move by Turkey could spur Kurdish demands for similar privileges in Syria and Iran and strengthen the KRG's political status. However, it was still too early to tell how far Turkey was willing to democratize its political system in order to accommodate Kurdish demands. While pundits described Ankara's overture as baby steps, they felt they would have long-term positive implication for Kurdish national identity. Iran had already two consulates in the Iraqi Kurdistan, one in Arbil and another in Sulaimaniya, and competed with Turkey for economic and political prominence in the region.

Postwar Turkey's trade with Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan, ballooned from about two billion dollars prior to the 2003 war to three billion dollars in 2007 and five billion dollars in 2008. By early 2010, Turkey's economic interests in Iraq had grown to the tune of about seven to eight billion dollars, putting the issue of the PKK on the backburner temporarily. As *Today's Zaman* put it, the relationship between Ankara and the KRG turned from redlines to red carpet for the KRG president, Barzani, who was officially invited to visit Ankara during June 2010. According to *Today's Zaman*, "Friendship with the Iraqi Kurds is one of the main pillars of Turkey to solve its long-running Kurdish problem."²⁶ Since the early days of the 2003 war, KRG had gained considerable international recognition and respect for the way they reinforced the rule of

law, managed and developed their region, and made it possible for their people to enjoy a degree of individual freedom and prosperity they had never seen before.

In recognition of KRG's cooperation, Turkey opened a consulate in Arbil on May 18, 2010, and appointed a top Turkish diplomat, Ayden Selcen, who cut short his tour in Washington, to travel to Arbil as consul general.²⁷ Selcen did not hesitate to break the long-standing Turkish taboo by calling northern Iraq as "Iraqi Kurdistan" or Barzani as its president, an act of treason for which he could have been prosecuted (in the past) "on charges of inciting ethnic separation."²⁸ Turkey hoped to weaken and not eliminate the PKK through social and economic reforms and creating employment opportunities for disenfranchised Turkey's Kurdish youth and dissuading them from joining the PKK.

Lifting the ban on speaking and broadcasting in Kurdish helped to soften the stand of radical Turkish military generals and politicians. Realizing that its own big army had failed to eradicate the PKK, Ankara stopped bugging Barzani, at least temporarily, that *peshmarga* should take up arms against them. However, the giant portraits of Atatürk displayed on the face of Kurdish mountains, looking down upon the Kurdish villages, emboldened many Kurdish youth to join the PKK and fight for freedoms and self-respect. In Qandil Mountain, where the Iraqi-Iranian-Turkish borders meet, images of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, loomed over land they controlled.²⁹

The Economist reported that during March–May 2010 clashes escalated between Turkish army and PKK rebels, when hundreds of Kurdish youth flocked into the conflict zone in order to create a human shield for the rebels. While Murat Karayılan, the PKK field commander, told the *Economist* reporter, "neither the most advanced technology nor the best equipped army can get us out of here [Qandil Mountain], a female PKK fighter called Gulistan said . . . that dying in our leader's service would be the greatest honor of all."³⁰ Even Prime Minister Erdoğan and his chief of general staff had come to the realization that "firepower alone cannot vanquish the PKK."³¹

Turkey's president Gül told reporters during his trip to Kazakhstan on May 24, 2010, that "the Kurdish issue was the most important issue in Turkey."³² As a sign of openness with Iraqi Kurdistan, presidents of four Turkish universities visited the University of Duhok on May 17, 2010, and expressed readiness to sign scientific cooperation deals with Kurdistan universities and claimed they felt in their hearts that they were in their own home.³³

The flourishing trade between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan was described as a major propeller of change between the two sides. *The*

Economist cited Turkey's consul general Celcen in Arbil saying, "If Iraqi Kurdistan was an independent country it would rank among Turkey's top ten trading partners."³⁴ He noted that Arbil's main boulevard was dotted with Turkish shops and its high-rise flashy buildings, such as the five-star Divan hotel, were built by Turkish construction companies; state-owned Turkish Airlines was to start operating in the region; and two major Turkish banks were to open branches in Arbil during June–July 2010.

The changing diplomatic atmosphere between the KRG and Ankara opened the door wide to the growing private and organizational exchanges between the two sides. On May 20, 2010, President Barzani received a Kurdish-Turkish delegation, consisting of Kurdish and Turkish politicians and academics, at his office in Salahadin.³⁵ Ayla Ata, deputy head of the Turkish delegation, expressed her delegation's pleasure at visiting the Kurdistan Region and said that her organization, which consisted of Kurds and Turks, was established to deepen the cultural dialogue between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region.³⁶ On his part, Barzani praised members of the organization, which he said would help bring Iraqi Kurdistan closer to Turkey. He added that ethnic cleansing, chemical attacks, and Anfal campaign against them have not weakened Kurdish people's ties to their neighbors, including Arabs, Turks, and Persians, who have lived together in the region for centuries. Professor Tayar Ari, member of the delegation, agreed that Arabs, Kurds, Turks, and Persians have deep historical brotherly relationships and that they should all take lessons from their past and learn to live together as one family.³⁷

Barzani Visits Ankara

Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, speaking to reporters at an Iraqi Sunni Arab opposition conference in Ankara on April 10, 2010, said while Turkey expected more cooperation from the KRG against the PKK, "Barzani was a welcome partner in Ankara."³⁸ Ankara's official invitation to President Barzani in early May 2010 further improved the growing political weight of the KRG in the international arena. After a six-year gap, Barzani paid a landmark visit to Ankara on June 2, 2010, as an important step toward normalizing relationships between the two sides.

A senior Foreign Ministry official, who wanted to remain anonymous, told the *Hurriyet Daily News* What is new with this visit is that we in the past solely used the "stick" but now we also have a carrot for them. We are talking about 400 companies that are doing business in Barzani's area

and we are talking about developing the infrastructure there. We want him [Barzani] to see the larger picture and we think he has started to tune into this.³⁹

Accompanied by a large delegation, Barzani arrived in Ankara on June 2, 2010, and was received by high-level Turkish officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Esanboga airport.⁴⁰ Barzani met with Ahmet Davutoglu, President Gul, and Prime Minister Erdogan and exchanged views about the security situation and commercial ties between the two sides.⁴¹ Speaking at a joint news conference with Barzani in Ankara on June 3, 2010, Davutoglu "called for greater cooperation from Iraqi Kurds" to fight the PKK.⁴² He also said that while Turkey was aiming at "economic integration with the neighboring, semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region, the members of the PKK [were posing] a threat. We expect full cooperation from all Iraqi brothers, especially from the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Administration, in the fight against terrorism."⁴³ Davutoglu added, "We have made the decision to implement a strategy enhancing economic integration between us. A work of full economic integration will be conducted as the bridge for these close relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds."⁴⁴ The talk about economic integration rather than economic cooperation reflected Turkey's long-term interest in the region.

As for the "stick," the *Hurriyet Daily News* reported that Turkish officials had asked Barzani to arrest a number of senior PKK members and deport them to Turkey. Ankara had made similar requests of Barzani in the past to no avail, because Iraq's Kurds were reluctant to start fighting their brethren across the border with Turkey.⁴⁵ Barzani told reporters, "We are against the continuation of violence. We do not see Turkey's security as separate from our own. We will expend all efforts to end this deplorable situation. We see our future in improved ties with Turkey. We are ready for all kinds of cooperation to further better our ties."⁴⁶ Davutoglu asserted that peace and security cannot be established where terrorism prevails.⁴⁷

President Gul received Barzani at the Republic Palace on June 6, 2010, and discussed ways and means to strengthen relationships among Turkey, Iraq, and Kurdistan Region.⁴⁸ Gul described Barzani's visit to Turkey as a significant event and hoped that many similar visits would follow. Both sides stressed the importance of the visit for improving political and economic ties and neighborly relationships.⁴⁹ Barzani also met the mayor of Istanbul, who warmly welcomed him to his office and described the visit as being historic and significant for upgrading ties between the two sides. After explaining the history of Istanbul, the mayor presented a gift to Barzani in the name of the Municipal Council.⁵⁰ Members of

Barzani's delegation held meetings with their counterpart agencies in order to strengthen ties in areas of common interests.

Henri Barkey, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC, described Barzani's visit to Ankara as historic and impossible to foresee a few years earlier, indicating a rapid change in Turkey's policy toward the Kurds.⁵¹ Barkey added that Turkey understood that the Kurds were its natural allies, who relied on Turkey's commercial and diplomatic support.

Shahin Bey of Istanbul University opined that the mutual trust between Turkey and Kurdistan was key to the stability of the region.⁵² He said Iraqi Kurds had "a calming effect on Turkish Kurds; they are more experienced and savvy and in many ways represent the best hope all the Kurds have for a peaceful and honorable existence."⁵³ Barkey claimed, "The more Turkey normalizes its relations with the [KRG], the easier it will be to work in Iraq and to work on domestic Kurdish question. Hence protecting the well-being of Iraqi Kurdistan is important to all Kurds and not just to those in Iraq."⁵⁴

In his May 2010 report, Barkey argued that Turkey needed the KRG's help to pacify the PKK and that "[t]he more integrated the [KRG] becomes with Turkey, the more interested Turkey will be in its welfare and future. If the dispute is about oil, then it is quite possible Turkey will side with Arbil, if the issue is strictly over ethnicity, then Ankara may side with Arabs, but in a lukewarm fashion."⁵⁵

News about Barzani's visit to Ankara flashed on the front page of Turkish newspapers and editorial pages. The *Aksam* reported that the main purpose of Barzani's visit was commercial with focus on energy, especially gas. The paper reported the Kurdistan Region had some 70 billion cubic meters of natural gas reserves and both sides wanted to benefit from it by linking the region to the Nabucco project to Europe.⁵⁶

Miliyyet wrote that other than the PKK issue, the importance of Barzani's visit lay in normalizing relationship with Iraq and that for Davutoglu to call Barzani "Kak Massoud" (brother Massoud in Kurdish) was indicative of Turkey's declining fear that the US occupation of Iraq would lead to the emergence of a Kurdish state. The same paper noted that Barzani's reception was at the highest diplomatic level in Ankara and met all state protocols, minus the Kurdish flag.⁵⁷ The paper also noted that Barzani had also avoided mentioning the PKK by name, or describing its members as terrorists, or helping Turkey in its fight against the organization and that there was no evidence that he would do so. The same paper claimed that Barzani established his state with the US support and without announcing it, and that his political, economic, and military capabilities were growing daily.

However, the paper ignored the fact that Ankara opened its door to Iraqi Kurds only after Gul returned from Washington, where he must have received assurances that they had no intention of recognizing Kurdish independence.

The *Turkish Daily Star* noted that the name of Barzani was important for many regional players in the Middle East and that the Kurdistan Region could become a center for competition between Turkey and Israel in the Middle East.⁵⁸ While being interviewed by the TRT television station in Turkey, Barzani claimed that the present Turkish government had done more than earlier governments on the Kurdish issue and that Turkey's Kurdish initiative was a correct step in the right direction.⁵⁹ He called for using direct routes for solving problems and reaching common understanding about major issues.

Barzani told reporters that this was his second visit to this important and beautiful city since 1992, when he met with the former Turkish president Turgut Ozal, who informed him of opportunities for nurturing relationships between the two sides.⁶⁰ When asked about the purpose of his visit to Turkey, and if he was pleased with the outcome of the meetings he had held with Turkish officials, Barzani responded that he came to cultivate friendly ties between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey and that he had held friendly and positive meetings with Turkish officials. He added that political, security, and economic issues dominated his meetings and that while he was dissatisfied with PKK's practices, Kurdish experience in Iraq showed the futility of using force, which complicates matters, and strongly supported Prime Minister Erdogan's courageous Kurdish initiative.⁶¹ He added that he had expressed his views to Turkish officials that practical steps were needed for achieving a successful conclusion to Prime Minister Erdogan's initiative in addressing the Kurdish issue peacefully, democratically, and humanely.

When asked about the issue of Kurdistan's independence, Barzani said while the Kurds were a nation who had rights just like the Arabs, Persians, and Turks, they were dispossessed of their rights but now they are faced with a reality within which the Kurds have the God-given right to determine their own future democratically.⁶²

The Turkish minister of commerce and industry, Sinan Celebi, was visiting the Kurdistan Region while Barzani was preparing to go on his official visit to Turkey. Celebi announced that a large Turkish delegation, consisting of two–three hundred merchants, industrialists, and investors, led by him, would visit the Kurdistan Region on June 29, 2010, in an effort to sign a number of commercial agreements.⁶³ He added that while some of the commercial projects in the pipeline concerned the Kurdistan Region, others concerned Baghdad. He said one

of the projects under study was a free trade zone on the border and that some 48 protocols related to large-scale commercial and industrial projects had been signed for promoting economic integration in the region.⁶⁴

Mehmet Zafer Caglayan, Turkey's minister of state for foreign trade, accompanied by two hundred business representatives, arrived in Arbil on June 29, 2010, in order to participate in a two-day conference discussing investment opportunities in the Kurdistan Region.⁶⁵ During his meetings with KRG officials, Caglayan discussed the opening of two new border crossings and establishing the free-economic zone in order to accommodate the increasing commerce between the two sides. The Turkish minister opined that the ongoing activities would boost trade between Turkey and Iraq to the tune of \$20 billion.⁶⁶

Ashti Hawrami, KRG minister of natural resources, who accompanied Barzani to Ankara, told reporters that the Kurdistan Region could make the Nabucco project viable by providing 490–520 billion cubic feet of natural gas a year and thus breaking the Russian monopoly on the European market.⁶⁷ The Nabucco project involved the extension of gas pipelines from Azerbaijan to Vienna, transporting 1.1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas per year through Turkey. The KRG was contemplating linking up with the Nabucco project.

Although Iran had established close ties with the KRG, Turkey's aggressive power-peddling policy had much greater long-term political, cultural, educational, and economic impact on Iraqi Kurds. Contrary to claims of integrating the economies of the neighboring states, pundits thought Ankara was trying to dominate their economies through its aggressive foreign economic policy. Ayden Selcen, Turkey's council general in Arbil, told a *New York Times* reporter: "No one is trying to overtake Iraq or one part [Kurdistan] of Iraq."⁶⁸ Observers warned that the Kurds should remain vigilant of Ankara's double-crossing and broader political, strategic, and economic interests in their region. Turkey's present short-term interests in Iraq's Kurdistan are only a step toward its broader national interests in the region.

Erdogan Vists Arbil

By early 2011, Turkey's investors, workers, and contractors, who accounted for about 70 percent of the business conducted in the Kurdistan Region, absorbed most of the KRG's 17 percent share of Iraq's oil revenues, amounting to about eight–nine billion dollars annually. While encouraging its investors and businessmen to participate in building Kurdistan's economy,

Turkey's military and diplomatic corps kept the KRG in line with their policy in Iraq.

Turkey's prime minister Erdogan visited Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region on March 28, 2011, in order to firm up the depth and breadth of Turkey's influence in Iraq. Erdogan and his large delegation, consisting of about two hundred businessmen and government officials, including Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, were met at the Baghdad International Airport by Prime Minister al-Maliki and his senior staff and were escorted to the Green Zone in Baghdad for discussions.⁶⁹

Today's Zaman wrote that Baghdad, Najaf, and Arbil became venues for a landmark declaration of Turkey's new approach to Iraq, which had been "modified since the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power nine years ago."⁷⁰ After cursory discussions with Iraqi officials, Erdogan visited the Kadhimiya mosque, containing the tombs "of the seventh Twelver Shiah [Shiite] Imam Musa al-Kadhim and the ninth Twelver Shia [Shiite] Imam Mohammed al-Taqi, and the tomb of Imam-e-Azam Abu Hanifa."⁷¹ He also visited the senior Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Imam Ali's Shrine in Najaf to assure the Shiite community that Ankara stands equal distance from Iraq's diverse ethnic and sectarian political factions.⁷²

Following Ankara's failed efforts to help Iyad Allawi, leader of the Sunni Arab-dominated Iraqiya List, become Iraq's next prime minister in 2010, Erdogan must have realized that it was time to restore normal ties with the Shiite prime minister al-Maliki, who had become prime minister instead of Allawi, by showing him that he was a nonsectarian politician. Ankara had created considerable hard feelings among the Shiite community when its foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu vigorously campaigned for the Sunni Arab dominated Iraqiya List to lead the next Iraqi government.⁷³

Erdogan's latest visit to Iraq was partly to clear the air and partly to solidify Turkey's growing political and economic foothold in Iraq. While meeting with al-Maliki on March 29, Erdogan embraced Iraq as a "brotherly nation" and "[f]or years we have felt in our hearts the ordeals and pains, and we have been following the developments since then with admiration."⁷⁴ He did not miss the occasion to remind the Iraqi parliament of Turkey's continued concern about the PKK's presence in the Iraq's Kurdistan by saying, "From now on, we don't want the terrorist organization [PKK] to stand as a source of evil between us."⁷⁵

After his brief visit to Baghdad and Najaf on March 28, Erdogan headed for Arbil, capital of Kurdistan Region, on March 29, 2011, in order to fortify and safeguard Turkey's national interests in the region. Kurdish officials described Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Arbil as a historic event since he was the first Turkish premier to visit their region. An observer

wrote, "Just three years ago it was inconceivable for even the most optimistic person here [in Kurdistan] to believe that a Turkish prime minister would ever set foot in Arbil, let alone receive such a welcome."⁷⁶

Cengiz Aktar, a political science professor at the Bahcesehir University in Turkey and columnist opined, "When we recall how in the past his [Erdogan] government was suspicious about the Kurdistan Regional Government for all kinds of reasons, his [Erdogan] visit certainly looks like a major leap forward."⁷⁷ However, H. Mirani, professor of political science at the University of Salahadin in Arbil, opined, "Our relations with Turkey are now normal, and there has been quite a good deal of progress in areas of economy and trade. But the relations are imbalanced in the realm of politics."⁷⁸ In reality, the KRG's relationship with Turkey in both economic and political spheres would continue to be one sided for many years ahead. While the Kurdistan Region offered thousands of jobs and employment opportunities to Turkish contractors, workers, and investors, and served as a dumping ground for Turkey's export products, Iraqi Kurds had little or nothing to sell Turkey, except oil and gas, which are under central government control.

The widespread discontent expressed by protestors against the KRG during mass demonstrations in Sulaimaniya and elsewhere in the Kurdistan Region during February–April 2011 was partly due to widespread corruption and nepotism and partly to lack of employment opportunities for the Kurdish youth. While new university graduates remained idle, thousands of foreign workers held lucrative jobs in construction companies, trade centers, hotels, and airports. This was partly due to the theoretical orientation of Kurdistan's educational system, which did not prepare students for the available jobs on the market, and partly to foreign companies' policies working in the region. The KRG copied the same futile curriculum taught at Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra universities, which were theoretical in nature. As a result, Kurdish students could not compete with foreign workers in their own backyard on an even keel.

Erdogan told Barzani that Turkey should give up its "traditional policy of denying Kurds in the country [Turkey]."⁷⁹ Yet, Turkey was still seemingly unwilling to change the Turkish constitution in a manner that would recognize more than one flag, one nation, and one language in Turkey in order to accommodate its large Kurdish community by granting them their fundamental freedoms and civil rights. Kurdish observers described Erdogan as being full of words and short of action when it came to millions of suppressed Kurds in his own country.

Barzani had reserved the honor of opening the Arbil International Airport, built mostly by Turkish contractors a year earlier, to Erdogan. While participating in a ribbon-cutting ceremony, Erdogan said that

the Turkish Airline would soon join the ongoing private flights in April in order to serve "our Kurdish brothers and the rest of Iraq."⁸⁰ Erdogan praised "Barzani, as well as Barham Salih, the current Kurdistan PM and Nechivan Barzani [former prime minister] for supporting Kurdistan's economic, cultural and political relations with Turkey."⁸¹

While welcoming Erdogan at the inauguration of the airport, Barzani said he was very pleased for the prime minister's presence at such a historic moment, which he described as the first important step in building Iraq's infrastructure in general and that of the Kurdistan Region.⁸² He added that Erdogan's visit to Iraq and Arbil was one of his important, courageous, and historical decisions for building a solid bridge between Iraqi people in general and the people of Kurdistan with Turkey's people. After giving high marks to Erdogan for his foreign policy, Barzani wished him success in the next election on June 12, 2011, so that his current endeavors for promoting peace and stability in the region continue.⁸³ He thanked Turkish companies for implementing development projects and Ambassador Murat Ozelik in Baghdad and Consulate General Aydin Celcen for making the occasion possible.⁸⁴

In reply, Erdogan said, "We have historical and cultural bonds with Iraq and with this beautiful region, now we'll be connected by airways. But I don't want to call it airways, rather I want to call it the way of the citizens and through this way of the citizens we will be connected to each other and connected to the rest of the world."⁸⁵ Erdogan joined Barzani and the Kurdistan Parliament Speaker (KRP) in the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the airport.

Barzani accompanied Erdogan to the inaugurations of the Turkish Consulate General and the International Bank of Turkey in Arbil. While opening the International Bank of Turkey, Erdogan promised that the opening of a Turkish Agricultural Bank would soon follow. Despite stating that it was time for Turkey to recognize the existence of its own Kurdish population, Erdogan avoided uttering the forbidden word "Kurdistan Region" and continued calling it northern Iraq or "this beautiful region."

It is Ankara's Way or the Highway

Iraqi Kurdistan became increasingly dependent on Turkey not only for technical support but also for about 70 percent of its consumer goods, construction material, and clothing.⁸⁶ At the inauguration of the Turkish Consulate General, Erdogan noted, "Last year Turkey did more than \$7 billion worth of business in Iraq and more than half of that with northern

provinces [Kurdistan Region]. There are more than 20,000 Turkish workers currently holding permits to work in Erbil [Arbil], and more than 35,000 in Duhok and Sulaimaniya," indicating strong economic ties between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸⁷ The figure about the size of Turkish business in Iraq in 2010 varied from seven to eight billion dollars, depending on the source of the information. Kurdish officials at times claimed that the figures reflected the total business done in the Kurdistan Region.

Following their ceremonial activities, Erdogan and Barzani held a closed-door meeting, which discussed economic and technical cooperation between the two sides, especially in the energy sector. While Taner Yildiz, Turkey's minister for energy and natural resources, held a meeting with his KRG counterpart, Ashti Hawrami, to discuss ways of promoting technical cooperation in the field of energy, Turkey's minister of state for foreign trade, Zafer Caglayan, participated in the opening of a Turkish school and two Turkish banks.⁸⁸ Erdogan and his delegation later returned to Baghdad to continue discussions with Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki and members of his cabinet on technical cooperation, trade, commerce and energy.

Since the outset of the 2003 war, Ankara openly and aggressively intervened in Iraq's internal affairs, especially when it came to addressing disputes between the KRG and Baghdad concerning disputed Kurdish areas, especially Kirkuk. Despite KRG officials' rhetoric that the issue of Kirkuk and other disputed areas must be resolved through Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, they increasingly became convinced that they had to accept Ankara's approach to settling the conflict through arbitration.

Although Arab settlers in the province of Kirkuk, backed by Iraqi Arabs, were a big part of the dispute, the KRG made substantial concessions to Ankara's proxies (Turkmans) during Erdogan's visit to Iraq. The Kurdish majority won the 2005 provincial election in Kirkuk and gained control of the provincial council and governorship. However, Turkmans and Arabs, supported by Turkey and Iraqi government, wanted to share power on equal bases. The dispute over power distribution between the three communities had simmered for about five years. In order to appease Ankara, the KRG tried to reshuffle power distribution in Kirkuk just before Erdogan's arrival, by offering a Turkman the provincial council leadership and the deputy governor's post to an Arab.

Kusrat Rasool, the deputy secretary general of the PUK, announced in December 2010 that Najmaldin Karim, lawmaker and member of the PUK, would replace governor Abdul Rahman Mustafa and a Turkman would replace the provincial council chairman, Rizgar Ali, both Kurds.⁸⁹ Under pressure from the KRG, both Mustafa and Ali resigned from their posts after long services in the province.⁹⁰ Abdul Salam Barwari, a

lawmaker in the KRP, told reporters on March 22, 2011, that President Barzani had proposed a package of reform that would entail addressing Kurdish-Turkman disputes over Kirkuk, without mentioning Arabs.⁹¹

The Iraqi Turkman Front leader, Sa'adeddin Arkij (Sattettin Argeç in Turkish), the only candidate to replace Ali, told the Kirkuk provincial council in advance of voting on his candidature for the council chairmanship that he would continue serving his own community's interests if his nomination was confirmed. Arkij's remarks outraged the Kurdish members of the council who immediately left the meeting.⁹² The officer-in-charge of the council, Ribaz Talabani, told reporters that it was incumbent upon Arkij, as council chairman, to take the interests of all ethnic and sectarian groups into account and not only those of Turkmen. Talabani said it was for this reason that Kirkuk's al-Muta'akhiya party (pro-Kurdish party), dominated by Kurds, abstained from approving Arkij's candidature until further notice.⁹³

Arkij's candidature for the provincial council leadership was delayed until the arrival of Erdogan in Baghdad, as if Ankara was the decider on the issue. Arkij told the *Kurd Net* reporter on March 28: "Turkey is pressuring us to narrow our differences with the Kurds over Kirkuk," and that the Turkish Embassy in Baghdad had invited them to attend a meeting with Erdogan on the issue.⁹⁴ The Turkman delegation met with Erdogan at the Turkish Embassy in the evening of March 28, and discussed among other things, the issue of Kirkuk. Pundits noted that Erdogan must have given the Turkman delegation a piece of his mind by telling them to go back to Kirkuk and accept the provincial council chair as a first step toward other political objectives.

After meeting with Erdogan, the Turkman Front replaced Arkij with Hassan Turhan for Kirkuk's provincial council leadership. Arkij later resigned from his party's leadership due to internal party discord. The Kurd-dominated provincial council of Kirkuk approved Turhan's candidature as their new leader just a few hours before Erdogan arrived in Arbil on March 29. Turhan's election was "a landmark gesture from Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani to Erdogan," hoping that would facilitate settling the future status of Kirkuk and possibly other disputed Kurdish areas in favor of the Kurds.⁹⁵ The move by the Kurds angered the Arab bloc in Kirkuk, who claimed that they, not the Turkmen, were entitled to the council leadership, and therefore turned down KRG's offer of deputy governor.⁹⁶

By getting closer to Ankara, the Kurds perhaps thought that Turkey might come to their help if Baghdad tried to bring them back to the fold following the US troop withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011. One must realize that Turkish officials would not sacrifice its broader national

interests in Iraq or the Arab world for the sake of the Kurds unless they had territorial interests in the Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite the concessions made by the KRG to the Turkmen, the latter continued supporting Arab political factions against Kurdish claims to Kirkuk and other disputed areas, where the Turkmen wanted to establish a parallel autonomous region. Some observers thought it was delusional of the Kurds to expect Ankara would help them extend their geographic outreach beyond their present boundaries, while Turkey continued depriving their own large Kurdish population of their fundamental civil and human rights.⁹⁷

To put the final nail on the coffin, Kirkuk's newly appointed provincial council leader, Hassan Turhan, echoed Ankara's earlier position on the future status of Kirkuk on May 14, announcing that reaching consensus under the central government supervision was the way to settle the issue and that the committee responsible for implementing Article 140 was now dead.⁹⁸ One wonders if KRG officials were aware that the Turkmen bloc whom they had granted greater power would turn around and stab them from behind. Had there been any reciprocity between the Kurds and Turkmen, Hassan Turhan, whom the KRG appointed as Kirkuk's provincial council chairman, would not have made such a statement against Article 140.

Turkey Becomes a Major Player in Iraq and Kurdistan

While Ankara tried overtly to improve ties with the KRG and al-Maliki's government, it worked covertly to undermine both sides by campaigning against them during and following the March 7, 2010, elections. Some of the 250,000 US restricted and secret cables and documents placed on the internet by WikiLeaks revealed that despite Ankara's rhetoric of standing equal distance from Iraq's political factions, Turkey had financed campaigns against the Kurds and Shiites during the March 7, 2010, elections. A cable from Christopher Hill, US ambassador in Baghdad, dated January 31, 2010, stated that while Ankara supported al-Maliki during his first term, Turkish ambassador Murat Ozelik in Baghdad had told US diplomats that he backed his rival, Iyad Allawi, because his government had thought al-Maliki would not be as cooperative as before if reelected.

According to the *New York Times*, "A Turkey as resurgent at any time since its Ottoman glory is projecting influence through a turbulent Iraq, from the bottom towns of the north to the oil fields near southernmost Basra, in a show of power that illustrates its growing heft across an Arab

world long suspicious of it.”⁹⁹ While pundits noted that the American number one enemy, Iran, had benefited from the Iraq War, which cost the United States about one trillion dollars and more than forty-four hundred American lives, it turned out that Turkey, not Iran, was reaping and continuing to reap the benefits of the long drawn out war.¹⁰⁰

Turkish politicians, investors, and contractors flocked into Iraq and vigorously competed with Iranians and Americans for power and money. While US contractors, including oil companies, sought large-scale contractual and commercial agreements, Ankara grabbed small- and large-scale projects. US general Michael Barbiro, who was responsible for training Iraqi forces, told reporters on January 5, 2011, that the United States and Iraq had signed agreements for the purchase of military equipment, fighter jets, tanks, ships, weapons, military training, and maintenance services amounting to some \$13 billion.¹⁰¹ While most Iraqis suffered from extreme poverty and the shortage of basic social services, their government was spending billions of dollars to purchase advanced military hardware from the United States.

US Ambassador to Baghdad Christopher Hill admitted that Turkey was unhelpful during the March 7, 2010, elections by actively financing the anti-Kurd campaign in Mosul, ending with a two to one margin in favor of Sunni Arab political coalition of the al-Hadba Party. While overtly consolidating its commercial interests in the KRG-administered region through its businessmen and contractors in order to absorb much of KRG’s 17 percent share of Iraq’s oil revenue, Ankara undercut Kurdish political interests in Iraq covertly.¹⁰² According to WikiLeaks cables, Ankara actively financed and supported the anti-Kurd radical Sunni Arab coalition, al-Hadba, in Mosul, which won the elections and marginalized the role of the Kurds in Nineveh’s administration.¹⁰³

While checking KRG’s growing popularity and influence, Turkey’s core interest in its next door neighbor was commercial. Ibrahim Khalil’s 26-lane border crossing in Duhok was clogged in early 2011 with some fifteen hundred trucks, loaded with building material, food, clothing, furniture, and other consumer goods, waiting their turn to enter Iraq.¹⁰⁴ In an effort to deprive Iraqi Kurdistan of tariffs collected from trading with Iraq in the early years of Iraq’s civil war and benefit their Turkmen’s brethren, Ankara reached an agreement with Baghdad to open a second border crossing near the city of Mosul. However, the project did not materialize due to lack of security in that area. The lack of security in the center and Mosul continued until the end of 2011 and beyond. By early 2011, Mosul, the capital of the Nineveh province, the bedrock of Sunni Arab nationalists and Ba’athists, continued to suffer from daily violence against government and Kurdish targets.

Despite its desire to help its Turkmen's brethren in Kirkuk and Mosul, Ankara preferred to cultivate its relationship with the KRG in order to spread its political, cultural, and commercial influence into Iraqi Kurdistan, which it used as a springboard to penetrate the rest of Iraq. Ankara had almost total hegemony over Iraqi Kurdistan and had as much, if not more, influence than the Iraqi government on the future shape of the KRG and the Kurdish community next door.

Anthony Shadid of the *New York Times* reported,

About 15,000 Turks work in Arbil and other parts of the north, and Turkish companies, more than 700 of them make up two-thirds of all foreign companies in the region. The Turkish consulate in Arbil issued as many as 300 visas a day. A Turkish religious movement operated 19 schools in the region, educating 5,500 students, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds mingling in a lingua franca of English.¹⁰⁵

While Ankara claimed it had embarked on a project of economic integration in the Middle East, observers asked why then Turkey was not first developing its own Kurdish region, where the majority of Kurdish population lived in utter poverty and suffered from a high level of unemployment, illiteracy, and infant mortality. Pundits wondered how Iraqi Kurds could rely on Turkey with close ties to Arab political factions, who strongly opposed their desire for autonomy and eventual independence.

United Nations Boost Ankara's Role in Iraq

As the United States prepared to withdraw its remaining forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, Turkey's star in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region was rising, as evidenced by the visit of the UN representative in Baghdad, Ad Melkert, to Ankara on May 6, 2011. Upon arrival to Ankara, Melkert held a meeting with Ahmet Davutoglu in order to discuss the evolving political and security situation in Iraq.¹⁰⁶ At a joint news conference with Davutoglu, Melkert said that the UN was in constant contact with the Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to support the security and stability of the region. Melkert, who had just returned from a visit to Washington and New York, sounded as if he was a super UN representative speaking on behalf of the Iraqi government to Turkish officials. Melkert told reporters that his discussions with Turkish officials had also included supporting Iraqi government efforts to create jobs through development projects.

Davutoglu stressed that Iraq is the cornerstone for the stability of the region, especially after al-Maliki's election as prime minister and as

al-Maliki government's success was a success for democracy in Iraq.¹⁰⁷ He added that Turkey attached considerable importance to Iraq's democratic process and economic development, that Iraqi and Turkish peoples' interests are intertwined, and that Ankara will continue to cooperate with the United Nations inside Iraq for maintaining peace and stability.

While Melkert and Turkey were discussing Iraq's political, economic, and security affairs in Ankara, insurgents were busy assassinating Iraq's senior political figures and members of the Iraqi army and police force. Unknown individuals assassinated some 50 people during April 2011 by using silencers and sticker bombs attached to vehicles.¹⁰⁸ Iraqi police reported that the assassins appeared in cars on Baghdad streets as soon as the daylight vanished. Some 14 people were assassinated during the first three days of May 2011. Iraqi security reported that both sectarian and political opposition factions were involved in the ongoing assassinations in order to settle political scores. Ali al-Dabbagh, government spokesperson, denied accusations by Sunni Arab politicians that Shiite militia forces were to blame for the assassinations.¹⁰⁹

US ambassador James Jeffrey told reporters in Baghdad on June 13 that he was shocked to see a small political organization such as Sadrists, accounting for about 10 percent of the parliament, blocking continued US troop presence in Iraq in order to build Iraq's army and air force capability to take care of Iraq's security needs.¹¹⁰ He said there is only one Iraqi (Muqtada al-Sadr) who takes pride in killing American soldiers. Jeffrey accused Iran of training and arming a number of the Shiite militia groups to kill American and Iraqi soldiers.

Chapter 11

Future Prospects of the KRG

Despite nearly nine years of military operations to tame intercommunal violence and create a new political order, Shiite and Sunni Arab political factions were still at loggerheads in early 2012, while the Kurds enjoyed a large degree of autonomy and economic prosperity. Two years after the March 2010 elections and after the last U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq, three security cabinet posts were still vacant in May 2012, and the government was unable to control Iraq's skies and international borders.¹

Daily Sunni Arab insurgent attacks continued, although at a lower intensity than at the peak of the civil war during 2006–2008.² Baghdad and other major cities, except for Iraq's Kurdistan, witnessed daily violence, which the Ministry of Interior attributed to the revival of al-Qa'ida and to Ba'ath Party efforts to overthrow the government.³ A series of bomb attacks killing 22 and injuring 70 occurred two days after Prime Minister al-Maliki requested the continued presence of five thousand US troops in Iraq through 2012.⁴ The US troops' withdrawal seemed premature because Iraqi troops were not ready to assume full security responsibility. People were fed up of the lack of security, social services, employment opportunities, and widespread corruption in government institutions.

President Obama declared the end of the war on November 3, 2011, and said he looked forward to “a new phase in relations between Iraq and the United States.”⁵ He rebuffed his critics, who claimed that the United States had lost out to Iran, by saying that no bloc except the Kurds had supported the US military immunity requirement.⁶ He argued that the war had left behind “an open political system and a 325-member parliament, whose proceedings are televised daily,” that the Iraqi pride and nationalism stood in the way of granting immunity to US soldiers, and that the issue had nothing to do with Iran.⁷ The Iraqi Kurds conducted a tireless

campaign for a continued US troop presence in Iraq, fearing that the US departure would jeopardize their security and expose them to the vagaries of aggression from the north and south.

President Talabani, a Kurd, and his two deputies, Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni Arab, and Khudhayir al-Khuza'i, a Shiite Arab, called for a meeting of political leaders in order to authorize al-Maliki to negotiate a new agreement giving US troops stationed in Iraq immunity while he was in Washington during the middle of December 2011.⁸ However, Iraq's political factions failed to reach an agreement on the topic.

Since the United States lost about forty-five hundred soldiers and spent about a trillion dollars on the war, Washington would have liked to keep some troops and military bases in Iraq in order to extend American military outreach in the region and check Iran's nuclear ambitions. Hoping that large numbers of US troops would remain in several bases in Iraq for a number of years, the United States established one of the largest embassies in the world in Baghdad with some sixteen thousand staff members.⁹ However, their having British colonial legacy fresh in their mind, Iraqis not only objected to the presence of US bases in Iraq but also refused to grant immunity to US soldiers who were expected to remain behind to train Iraqi troops and help protect Iraq's skies from foreign intrusion. Evidently, the planners of the 2003 war had an unrealistic vision for Iraq. Less than two months after US troop withdrawal from Iraq, the US State Department decided to slash the size and scope of the US Embassy in Baghdad by about half due to Iraqi government restrictions on staff movements and their interaction with local people.¹⁰ Iraqis also objected to the presence of a large number of contractors in the embassy, who they suspected of engaging in espionage and political subversion.

The KRG and Iraqi Government

While holding on to the posts of presidency, foreign ministry and deputy prime minister in the central government, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials continued to consolidate the administrative, political, and economic bases of their autonomous region. The Kurds tried to keep out of the bitter political dispute between Sunni and Shiite Arabs, who continued to bicker about the distribution of power. Although there is deep distrust and suspicion between all three major communities, it is less so between the Kurds and Shiites, who have many issues in common.

The Sunni Arab political factions frustrated al-Maliki to the extent that they rendered his coalition government—cobbled together under US

pressure—dysfunctional. Al-Maliki threatened in early 2011 to resort to majority rule unless Sunni Arabs agreed to his terms of governance and stopped plotting against him.¹¹ While visiting Washington on June 28, 2011, the Sunni speaker of the Iraqi parliament, al-Usama al-Nujaifi, told reporters that members of his community were fed up of the political stalemate and that his community might seek separation.¹² A Sunni member of the parliament, who preferred to remain anonymous, told reporters on June 29 that high-level Sunni Arab politicians were holding meetings in Amman, Jordan, in order to announce the formation of an autonomous region similar to that of the Kurds in the north.¹³ It was not clear whether al-Nujaifi was pressing al-Maliki to yield to their demands for more power or if he had reached the conclusion that Sunni Arabs would be better off if they too had local autonomy. Al-Nujaifi's move came as a surprise to many because Sunni Arabs had earlier shunned the concept of federalism, which was promoted by the Kurds.

By October 2011, most Sunni Arab-dominated provinces in the center, led by Salahadin, Anbar, Nineveh, and Diyala, accused al-Maliki of depriving them of power and budget needed to administer their own affairs.¹⁴ Mohammed Iqbal, a lawmaker member of the Iraqiya List, blamed the surge in demand for the creation of autonomous regions on al-Maliki's drive to arrest former Ba'ath party members by accusing them of plotting to overthrow him.¹⁵ *The Boston Globe* reported on October 27, 2011, that al-Maliki had arrested 615 Ba'athists after the Libyan interim leader, Mahmoud Jibril, informed him that Mu'ammār Qadhafi had helped Iraqi Ba'athists to plot a coup against him before his downfall.¹⁶ Kamal al-Sa'idi, a lawmaker and member of al-Maliki's State of Law coalition, told reporters that they had damning intelligence of the plot but were reluctant to release it for security reasons.¹⁷

As the security vacuum widened due to the US troop withdrawal, assassinations and kidnappings of military and police officers, doctors, and teachers escalated. A high-ranking Iraqi police officer, who preferred to remain anonymous because of his sensitive position, told a reporter from *Reuters* that it would be difficult to stop the ongoing assassinations because the assassins wore official uniforms and badges, and had permits to carry weapons with silencers.¹⁸ He claimed the assassins had ties to powerful Shiite political factions who feared the return of Ba'athists to power.¹⁹ In retaliation, Sunni Arab insurgents carried out massive suicide and car bomb attacks on Shiite rites and pilgrims, killing and maiming dozens, as if the civil war had not ceased since 2006. Al-Maliki told reporters on May 23 that the country was still suffering from politically sponsored violence and that his government had taken necessary measures to combat it.²⁰

A two-car bomb attack on June 21, 2011, on the home of the Diwaniya governor in a mostly Shiite district killed 24 and injured many more.²¹ Three days later, a spectacular four-bomb attack on a Shiite neighborhood in the western part of Baghdad killed at least 40 and injured 80.²² Officials claimed that this “was the worst attack in the capital since a parked car bomb exploded near a mourning tent in a northern Baghdad neighborhood in January [2011] killing 48 people.”²³ *Reuters* reported on October 12, 2011, that “[s]uicide bombers and roadside blasts targeted police in a wave of attacks across Baghdad on Wednesday [October 12], killing 23 people and wounding dozens on the second day of serial bombings in the Iraqi capital in less than a week.”²⁴

Al-Maliki visited the White House on December 13, in advance of total US troop withdrawal from Iraq, in order to express Iraq’s appreciations for the sacrifices made by the United States to free Iraqis from Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian rule. President Obama declared that “those days are over with the last American troops heading home, but he pledged the United States will remain committed to the fledgling government they leave behind.”²⁵ While acknowledging Obama’s concern about Iraq’s relationship with Syria, al-Maliki opined that “Assad’s removal could lead to civil war in Syria that could spread across the region.”²⁶

Upon al-Maliki’s return to Iraq, the five-member Iraqi Higher Court issued a warrant for the arrest of the Sunni vice president Tariq al-Hashimi, accusing him of sponsoring death squads, plunging the country into its deepest political crisis.²⁷ Three of al-Hashimi’s bodyguards confessed on television that they had carried out bombings and assassinations in exchange for money received from their boss. They also admitted responsibility for the November 2011 attack on the parliament. To make things worse, al-Maliki demanded that Salih al-Mutlaq, the deputy prime minister, be stripped of his parliamentary immunity so that he could be fired for accusing al-Maliki of being a worse dictator than Saddam Hussein was. Both al-Hashimi and al-Mutlaq fled to Kurdistan in order to escape arrest. As a result, Sunni Arab lawmakers boycotted the parliament and cabinet members boycotted weekly cabinet meetings, protesting the government’s actions. Al-Maliki called on the KRG to surrender the two fugitives to the federal government for questioning in Baghdad. Iraq’s Ministry of Interior made a formal request to the KRG on January 8, 2012, to surrender al-Hashimi and 12 of his entourage and prevent them from leaving the country.²⁸

In response to a question by a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) reporter about the status of al-Hashimi’s case, President Barzani said that there were two ways to deal with the issue, one through the legal system and the other through dialogue.²⁹ He added that since the political factions

do not trust the legal system, it would be prudent to address the conflict through dialogue, an approach also supported by Washington.

Out of anger against al-Maliki, Sunni Arab insurgents launched a series of coordinated attacks in Baghdad and in the southern city of Nasiriya on Shiite pilgrims commemorating the death of Imam Hussein, Prophet Mohammed's grandson, on January 5, killing 78 and injuring more than 100.³⁰ Two weeks earlier, the insurgents had launched another wave of attacks on Shiite targets in Baghdad, killing 69 and injuring many more. Observers feared that these attacks might provoke Shiite militias into confrontation with Sunni insurgents, triggering a new round of civil war.

In the presence of deeply rooted mistrust and suspicion between Iraq's three major communities (Kurds, Sunni, and Shiite Arabs), democratic principles failed to take root, as evidenced by the follow up to the 2005 and 2010 nationwide elections that had led to the emergence of dysfunctional coalition governments. After about two years of political wrangling following the 2010 March elections, the parties failed to reconcile their differences based on the outcome of President Barzani's Arbil initiative concerning the establishment of the Higher Strategic Policy Council, the US brainchild, and filling the ministerial posts of national security, defense, and interior. President Barzani suggested that these issues and those related to al-Hashimi's case be addressed at a national reconciliation conference. By January 11, 2012, Iraq's political blocs were still contributing ideas to the preparatory committee to prepare the conference agenda.³¹

Although the Sunni and Shiite political factions had agreed to a set of proposals by President Barzani at a roundtable Arbil meeting in November 2010, the two sides failed to implement them. Sunni Arabs wanted to couch the terms of reference for the council in a manner to impinge on the prime minister's authority and rejected candidates proposed by him for filling the vacant posts. Al-Maliki also failed to implement the 19 demands the Kurds had made in exchange for supporting his candidature as prime minister in 2010. The KRG demands included addressing the issue of disputed Kurdish territories, promulgating a new oil law, and regularizing a budget for the *peshmarga*.

In the face of the growing security vacuum, the US Embassy established two new consulates, one in Mosul and another in Kirkuk, in order to monitor events in the disputed Kurdish areas and help the central government to prevent major clashes between Kurds and Arabs. In an effort to appease the Sunni Arab community, whom they disenfranchised from power in 2003, the United States helped them regain control of the administration of provinces they dominated in 2009 but failed in its efforts to help them lead the coalition government in 2010 or gain substantial power in Baghdad. Although Sunni Arabs filled some eight cabinet positions, they

failed to reach an agreement with the Shiite bloc on the terms of reference for the Higher Strategic Policy Commission or to fill the vacant posts of the ministers of defense, interior, and national security. The United States made concerted efforts to help the Sunnis gain more power in order to undermine the festering Sunni Arab insurgency and check Iranian influence in Iraq.

The KRG, Turkey, and Iran

In the absence of US troops in Iraq, the KRG would be at the mercy not only of Iraq's Arab majority but also of the neighboring states, especially Turkey and Iran. The US presence in Iraq had created a psychological buffer between the KRG and Iraqi Arabs, Turkey, and Iran. As news spread about the US troop withdrawal, Turkey and Iran escalated cross-border attacks on their respective Kurdish rebel fighters' (Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan [PKK] and Partiya Jiyani Azadi Kurdistan [PJAK]) hideouts on Qandil Mountain inside Iraqi Kurdistan. The muscle flexing by Turkey and Iran inside Iraqi Kurdistan was reminiscent of the duel between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires to control Kurdistan in 1514 during the battle of Chaldiran.³² The intense Turkish aerial strikes and shelling by Iran caused considerable material destruction, loss of life, and dislocation of Kurdish villagers while the 2011–2012 winter season was setting in.

Media reported on October 6 that Iran had established a number of military camps in Balakayaty, Mawatan, and Shwarush near Haji Umran inside Iraqi Kurdistan and connected them with Iranian power grids, indicating Iran's long-term ambition in the region.³³ Iranian action also might have been to counter Turkey's military efforts to consolidate its military outposts in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, told reporters on October 10, 2011, "Security and intelligence operations against the counter-revolutionary Kurdish group PJAK (Party of Free Life in Kurdistan) will continue until a total annihilation of the rebels."³⁴

In an effort to stop the cross-border violence, President Barzani rushed the former KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, to Tehran to express concern about the Iranian shelling and arrange meetings for him with Iranian officials concerning border security. President Barzani traveled to Tehran on October 30 with a large delegation in order to inform Iranian officials that he had extracted a ceasefire concession from the PJAK and that therefore Iran should halt cross-border operations into Iraqi Kurdistan, which had caused considerable destructions and human suffering.³⁵ Barzani held a series of meetings with President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, parliament speaker Ali Larinjani, and the Iranian National Security Council chairman Sa'id Jalili to discuss commercial and border security issues.

Observers opined that Iran captured and later released Murat Karayilan, leader of Turkey's PKK, in 2011 in order to draw his organization to its side against Ankara, which was supporting Syrian Sunni Arab insurgents to bring down the Shiite minority rulers in Damascus. It was, therefore, logical to see the PKK pull back its sister organization (PJAK) from the Iranian border, possibly in exchange for weapons.

Following the approval of the cross-border military operation plan by the Turkish parliament, President Abdullah Gul traveled to Hakkari province to meet and dine with Turkish soldiers in an apparent preparation for cross-border operations against the PKK.³⁶ In order to preempt Turkey's military operation into Iraqi Kurdistan, some 200 PKK fighters launched a surprise attack on eight Turkish military outposts in Cukurca, Hakkari province inside Turkey, killing 24 and injuring 18.³⁷ Infuriated by the PKK surprise attack, Turkey's fighter jets and ground forces pounded suspected PKK targets on Qandil Mountain, killing scores of rebel fighters. According to a German expert, Enrich Schmidt-Eenboom, the body of one of 36 PKK fighters killed in Kazan Valley in Cukurca, bore marks of chemical weapons.³⁸ The photograph of the body shown in newspapers was charred beyond recognition.

Once again, President Barzani rushed Nechirvan Barzani to Ankara to condemn the PKK attack and convey the KRG's condolences to the families of those killed and injured.³⁹ Upon Erdogan's insistence, President Barzani himself traveled to Ankara on November 3, 2011, a day before the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adhha, in order to discuss border security with Erdogan and Davutoglu, who had asked him to openly denounce the PKK and offer his help to fight them.⁴⁰ Despite considerable pressure and sweet brotherly talk, Barzani resisted Ankara's pressure to use Kurdish *peshmarga* against the PKK and told Erdogan that he opposed wars and the Turkish parliament should address the conflict.⁴¹

Iraq's prime minister al-Maliki tried to exploit the incident to boost his position by offering to send Iraqi troops to expel the PKK and PJAK from the Kurdish region.⁴² Both Ankara and Baghdad tried to incite Iraq's Kurds against Turkey's Kurds. The *peshmarga* spokesman, Jabbar Yawar, rebuffed al-Maliki by stating that his troops should first stop the violence in the center and south rather than sending them to the north, where they could not be able to stop the rebel fighters' hit-and-run operations.⁴³

Before withdrawing its troops from Iraq, the United States transferred four of its pilot-less predator drones to the Incirlik airbase in Turkey in order to help Ankara fight the PKK. As a result, Turkey was able to gather

real-time information about PKK movement and attack their bases more effectively. In order to keep villagers out of harm's way, the KRG relocated them to new settlements costing them millions of dollars.

In its aggressive drive to destroy the PKK, Turkish fighter jets killed some 35 and injured 28 of Turkey's Kurdish civilians who were smuggling diesel oil, cigars, and other consumer items from Iraqi Kurdistan to the Kurdish region of Turkey in order to make ends meet.⁴⁴ Some 16–18 minutes after the predator attack, Turkish fighter jets arrived at the scene to finish the job.⁴⁵ Pundits noted that in the absence of employment opportunities, these people had become regular smugglers known to Turkish border guards. While Ankara claimed that the incident was an unfortunate mistake, others accused the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) of "providing incorrect intelligence that indicated that villagers, who frequently smuggle in goods at the border," were PKK fighters.⁴⁶ Sezgin Tanrikulu, deputy leader of the Republican People's Party, led by Kemal Kilicdaroglu, said that government's dismissive attitude toward the incident "profoundly hurt the people of the region."⁴⁷

Ramification of the Syrian Uprising for the Kurds

As the March 2011 uprising in Syria gained momentum, some 12 disorganized underground Kurdish political factions emerged into the open without a clear path or message to deliver. The most conspicuous of these parties were the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan of Syria (PUKS), and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). While the KDPS and PUKS were associated with Iraq's KDP and PUK, the PYD was associated with the PKK.⁴⁸

Despite their sensitive positions, the KDP and the PUK advised their counterparts to maintain close contact with the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul and try to extract from them maximum political concessions. The Kurdish political factions complained that the SNC had denied them sufficient recognition by assigning to them only a few seats on the council.⁴⁹ The PYD, associated with anti-Ankara PKK, allied itself with al-Assad government, which was struggling for survival. In an effort to divide the Syrian opposition and incite Turkey's Kurds against their government, al-Assad promised Syrian Kurds that the government would recognize their ethnic identity, grant citizenship to some two hundred thousand unregistered Kurds, lift the ban on ownership of land along the border with Turkey, open Kurdish schools, and grant them autonomy in

the north.⁵⁰ Ankara warned Damascus of retaliation if it used its Kurdish card to incite Turkey's Kurds against their government. The Kurdish Youth Movement was at variance with the SNC for lining up with Ankara and accused it of having signed an agreement with Turkey against the Kurds and of turning Syria into a Turkish colony.⁵¹

It might have been more prudent of Ankara to make peace with its own Kurdish population instead of threatening Syria against using its Kurdish card. The Kurdish conflict in Turkey had taken more than forty-five thousand lives and cost billions of dollars since 1984. While warning al-Assad against using his Kurdish card, Ankara tried to pit the Iraqi Kurds against their brethren across the border, a tactic that President Barzani rejected during his November 3, 2011, visit to Ankara. Iran also used the Iraqi Kurds against Saddam Hussein's government during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War and was now inciting Turkey's Kurds against Ankara. While denying the rights of its own large Kurdish population, Ankara courted the KRG, not only to incite them against the PKK, but also to create a buffer with the violence-prone Arab Iraq and possibly to retake Iraqi Kurdistan's Mosul *Wilayat* (province), which it lost to Britain following World War I.

The Boston Globe reported that Erdogan had apologized on November 24, 2011, "for the first time for the killings of nearly 14,000 people in a bombing and strafing campaign to crush a Kurdish rebellion in the 1930s."⁵² The paper added that the apology "was no big change in heart but a political tactic to tarnish the reputation of the opposition party [CHP], which was in power at that time,"⁵³ and to draw Kurdish voters to his side. Although Erdogan brought the Kurdish issue to the open, he failed to take necessary steps to address it. Ankara should take note of its failed Kurdish assimilation policy of the past nine decades and try to adopt a new strategy that would embrace not only its own Kurdish population but also those of the neighboring states in the spirit of real democracy, peace, stability, and economic prosperity in that troubled part of the Middle East.

Conclusions

Surrounded by adversaries from all sides, KRG officials perhaps decided from the outset of the 2003 Iraq War to establish close economic and political ties with Turkey, which shunned them as separatists until 2010. While Iraqi Kurds realized that Turkey's Kurdish record was not impeccable, they preferred Turkey to Arab Iraq and other neighboring states because of Turkey's ties to the United States, membership in the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO), and its democratic practices, even though imperfect. Most importantly, Turkey offered Iraqi Kurds an important outlet to the West, as well as expertise and financial resources to develop their region. Although the Kurds had long cooperated with Tehran, they were cognizant of Iran's strained relationships with the West because of its nuclear enrichment program and unfriendly stand toward Israel.

The desperate attempt by the Iraqi Kurds to hook up with Ankara helped the latter dominate them economically, culturally, and militarily and ignored the fact that Turkey was no more enthusiastic than Baghdad or Tehran or Syria about Kurdish national ambitions. Sunni and Shiite Arab political leaders frequented Ankara from the inception of the 2003 war in order to bid against each other and press Turkey to check the Iraqi Kurdish drive for greater autonomy. This gave Turkey additional space to manipulate one side against the other in order to advance its own strategic interests in the Kurdish region and Iraq.

Turkey had already established several military outposts in Iraqi Kurdistan during the Kurdish civil war (1994–1998), when the KDP and the PUK sought Turkey's help to separate their forces. After signing the Washington Accord in 1998, the KRG called on Turkey to withdraw its forces from the region to no avail. Although Turkey had withdrawn its so-called Peace and Monitoring Force from the region in 2004, it kept military outposts in the districts of Imadiya, Bamerni, Sheladiz, and Kani Masi.⁵⁴ Instead of withdrawing its forces, Turkey consolidated them during 2011 in advance of the US troop withdrawal from Iraq.

Pundits opined that the neighboring states would not venture to unravel the KRG in the presence of large numbers of Western and Middle Eastern consulates and commercial centers. While appreciating the moderating role played by the Kurds in the region and Iraq, the neighboring states had no intention of granting them opportunities to declare independence, fearing that might incite their own Kurdish minorities to do the same.

An *al-Sharq al-Awsat* reporter asked President Barzani if the Kurds were now ready to declare independence, since they have established legislative, judicial, and executive institutions and have an elected parliament. Barzani replied, "Yes, but the Kurds were still committed to the Iraqi constitution despite the fact that the central government has violated some of its articles."⁵⁵

Amid the ongoing political hiatus in the region, the Iraqi Kurds maintained a low profile by minding their own business and offering to ameliorate the rising tension between the PKK and Turkey on the one hand and between the PJAK and Iran on the other. They also acted as peacemakers between Sunni and Shiite Arabs throughout the Iraq War (2003–2012) in order to maintain Iraq's unity, as the United States had desired. Iraqi

Kurds avoided being drawn into the Turkish-PKK, Iranian-PJAK, or Iraq's Sunni-Shiite conflicts. Despite gaining considerable recognition as peace-makers, KRG officials navigated the muddy political waters of the region and Iraq cautiously.

While addressing the KRG representatives abroad, President Barzani proudly announced, "We have come a long way since the days when our representatives abroad could only see junior government officials and even that only in informal settings. I urge you to work towards strengthening our relations with countries around the world."⁵⁶ For his part, Prime Minister Salih told the representatives, "This conference is taking place at an important time, when the Kurdistan Region is witnessing large economic development and is becoming an economic power [house] in the Middle East."⁵⁷

With the increasing number of the KRG's semiformal diplomatic representations abroad, 23 foreign consulates⁵⁸ and numerous foreign commercial interests in Arbil, Iraqi Kurdistan resembled a state within a state, and their officials conducted themselves as if they represented a full-fledged independent state. Among states having established consulates in the region were Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Iran, Britain, the United States, Russia, Germany, and France. Likewise, the KRG had established an impressive number of representations in countries such as the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, Iran, Australia, Austria, and Sweden.⁵⁹

During an interview by the *Kurdish Globe*, Falah Mustafa, the KRG foreign affairs director, noted that good relationships and interactions with the neighboring states, especially Turkey and Iran, and the international community serves mutual interests.⁶⁰ He opined, "We share the values of Western democracies, the respect of human rights, individual and public freedoms, freedom of the media, rule of law and an active and vibrant participation of civil society."⁶¹ It might very well be for these reasons that the West had opened its doors to KRG officials.

The diplomatic exchanges between the KRG and the neighboring states had been on the rise since 2010 when President Barzani visited several Middle Eastern countries, especially Turkey. April 2011 was the climax of diplomatic activities when Prime Minister Erdogan visited Arbil in order to open the Turkish consulate and press the KRG to yield more power to his brethren Turks in Kirkuk.

Iraqi Kurdistan served as an island of tranquility amid unrest in the neighboring states, providing sanctuary to Kurdish activists and politicians from neighboring states. Representatives of some 30 Kurdish political organizations from Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria gathered in Sulaimaniya in November 2011 in an effort to evaluate the impact of the ongoing political

unrest in the region on the Kurds and create a network that would promote solidarity among them.⁶²

Following his return from a visit to Washington in November 2011, Prime Minister Barham Salih told a large crowd while opening “the City Star Mall” in Sulaimaniya that the international community appreciates the importance of Kurdistan’s strategic location, its stability and rapidly growing economy, which has provided a safe and secure environment for foreign investors.⁶³ He added that KRG would not surrender its constitutional rights to the central government and would not cancel the recent agreement signed with Exxon Mobil for oil exploration in the region, as the central government has demanded.

In contrast to achievements made, KRG officials found themselves between a rock and a hard place when it came to al-Maliki’s foot-dragging to address their grievances. With their relatively strong economy, vast oil and gas reserves, abundant mineral resources, fertile agricultural land, plenty of water, and a large pool of young labor force, Iraqi Kurdistan had the wherewithal to become a self-sustained and prosperous state. Yet the KRG avoided taking concrete steps toward independence, claiming that they would remain in Iraq as long as the present democratic federal system of government lasts, which was increasingly becoming uncertain. They justified their argument by stating that independence was not an option at present, especially in the face of opposition from the neighboring states and the landlocked feature of their enclave. Kurdish political leaders described the demand made by some 98 percent of their people—who called for independence during two unofficial referenda in 2004 and 2005—as a pipe dream. They did not even consider exploring possibilities for independence in the international arena (United Nations) in an effort to establish a reference point in case the present partnership arrangement with Baghdad failed to work. However, President Barzani later declared that he might eventually not be able to stand in the way of Kurdish demands even if that meant declaring independence.⁶⁴ Barzani’s chief of staff, Fu’ad Hussein, told reporters on January 10, 2012, that during his December 2011 visit to Washington, a joint committee was formed to prepare a memorandum of understanding between the United States and the KRG, without providing further information.⁶⁵

While arguing that they did not seek independence because of opposition from the neighboring states, KRG officials threatened that they would split from Iraq if the constitution changed to their disadvantage.⁶⁶ The leader of the Iraqiya List, Sulaiman al-Jumaily, announced in the Iraqi parliament on December 8, 2011, that it was important to rewrite the constitution, after US troop departure from Iraq, in a manner that would reflect Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁶⁷ Iraq’s prime minister

al-Maliki had often claimed that the constitution promoted sectarian division and contained dangerous political land mines. The Kurds feared that the purpose of rewriting the constitution was to strengthen Iraq's Arab identity and weaken the KRG's authority.

While behaving as members of a separate state, KRG officials refrained from declaring their future political path.⁶⁸ The present uncertain course taken by the KRG created numerous technical and legal problems for the central government. The signing of oil exploration contracts with foreign companies had been a recurrent problem between Arbil and Baghdad for the past years. Iraq's minister of oil, Abdul Karim al-Lu'aibi, said on December 9, 2011, "It is up to the Kurdistan Region to decide whether it has made a strategic decision to stay part of Iraq or it has made up its mind to establish its independent state."⁶⁹ It appeared that Iraqi Kurds were seeking independence through the back door by establishing strong political and commercial ties with powerful governments and international companies rather than through confrontations with their neighbors, who opposed their national aspirations.

Since the KRG's argument that they had chosen to be part of Iraq as long as the central government respected the constitution is not enshrined in a legal document notarized by a third party such as the United Nations, the KRG could not split from Iraq at the stroke of a pen. In the absence of such a legal document, the Kurds would ultimately come into a head-on collision with the central government, neighboring states, and the United States if they declared independence.

Although parent governments of foreign consulates and commercial centers in Arbil might be sympathetic to the Kurdish cause, it is unlikely that they would intervene on their behalf unless the situation threatens regional stability. The recent dispute over an oil contract between Exxon-Mobil and the KRG might clarify the point. The US State Department spokesperson, Victoria Nuland, told reporters on November 22, 2011, "The United States has advised all of our companies, including Exxon Mobil . . . that they run significant political and legal risks, if they sign contracts with any parties in Iraq before there has been a national agreement."⁷⁰ Harvard Kennedy School professor Meghan O'Sullivan warned that mixing politics with oil was dangerous and might destabilize the oil market and threaten international energy security. She added, "Having a stable Iraq that can bring more oil to the global market will benefit the Iraqi people and the world as a whole."⁷¹

Baghdad and Arbil have long been at loggerheads over the interpretation of the constitution, which appeared to grant regional governments, including the KRG, authority to explore for oil jointly with the central government. Being aware of the central government's opposition to the

present constitution, the KRG took the liberty to sign some 40 oil contracts with foreign companies during past years in order to expedite developing their own oil resources for meeting domestic and export demands.⁷² The government considers such contracts illegal, and wants a new law promulgated to regulate oil exploration in the country. However, numerous roundtable meetings between the two sides since 2007 have proven to be futile.⁷³ Contrary to the narrative of the constitution, the central government claims to be the sole authority for oil exploration and marketing.

Many politicians had foreseen the seeds of discord in the new constitution, which was rushed by US experts in order to meet their own timetable. Although 78 percent of eligible voters supported the constitution in 2005, many Sunni and Shiite political factions opposed it for recognizing the KRG, granting the Kurds veto power, preserving their *peshmarga*, controlling regional resources, and rights to Arabized Kurdish territories. The central government dominated by Arabs held no regard for the constitution, as evidenced by its unwillingness to address the issue of disputed areas, internally displaced Kurds, and KRG's oil exploration rights.⁷⁴

Fearing that Iraq's Arab majority might destabilize their region, the KRG demanded that a small US army contingency be left behind in disputed Kurdish areas in order to prevent clashes between the *peshmarga* and government forces. The role of the trilateral force, consisting of US, Iraqi, and KRG forces, ended with the departure of US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011. The security of disputed areas was left to joint Iraqi and *peshmarga* forces, who were at loggerheads. The KRG needed a third-party military contingency under the UN aegis to act as a buffer between KRG and government forces.⁷⁵ US senators John McCain, Joseph Lieberman, and Lindsey Graham were critical of the Obama administration for not leaving some ten thousand soldiers behind in order to prevent another civil war triggered by confrontations between Kurdish *peshmarga* and government forces in disputed Kurdish areas, which US officials had often described as a powder keg or trigger line.⁷⁶

In addition to challenges posed by the neighboring states and the central government, the KRG had to deal with the restless Kurdish youth and disenfranchised segments of the Kurdish society, led by Gorran and two Islamic parties, Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), who were critical of ongoing rampant corruption and nepotism in the region. The Kurdish youth were likely to escalate pressure on the KRG for more openness, freedom of press and speech, equal employment opportunities, and better social services.

The opposition of Kurdistan's two Islamic parties (KIG and KIU) to the sale of alcoholic beverages, massage parlors, and entertainment places in Duhok were likely to earn them greater support among the conservative

segments of the Kurdish society. Several KIU clerics in Duhok and Zakho condemned these businesses as un-Islamic during Friday prayers on December 2, 2011, which led to attacks by worshippers on liquor stores, massage parlors, and entertainment places owned by Yazidis and Christians. Some 32 people, mostly police officers, were injured.⁷⁷ In retaliation, KDP party members set fire to a number of KIU offices and television and radio stations in Duhok, Zakho, and Arbil. President Barzani condemned the attacks and called for an urgent investigation of the incident. The KIU condemned the assaults on its facilities and claimed that those responsible for the incident were KDP members.⁷⁸ Barzani noted that some extremist groups had incited the violence, criticized his security force (*peshmarga*) for failing to stop the violence, and called for peaceful coexistence among the peoples of Kurdistan. Gorran, KIU, and KIG, who were boycotting the regional government, refused to attend a meeting called by Barzani to assess the situation. .

The present deep fissures between the ruling parties and opposition do not bode well for the stability of the Kurdish region, which need urgent political reforms. In the absence of close cooperation and coordination between Kurdish political factions, the Kurds might lose important cabinet seats to Sunni Arabs following the next elections. Although the opposition patched up their differences with the ruling parties, they declined to participate in the new rotating two-year government of Nevchirvan Barzani, KDP deputy leader, who took over from PUK's Barham Salih in early 2012. .

Although both Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani had earlier declared that they would not run for another term, it would be unthinkable to see these two heavyweight Kurdish politicians disappear from the scene soon. Both politicians have played important roles to preserve Iraq's unity by trying to settle rampant political disputes between Sunni and Shiite political factions, who are deeply distrustful of each other. While Massoud Barzani was still young and enjoyed good health, Jalal Talabani's age and health betrayed him. Although Kusrat Rasul, an old PUK guard, was in line after Talabani, observers found him be a dull and uninspiring leader.

Kurdish politicians such as Nawshirwan Barzani, Nawshirwan Mustafa, Hoshiyar Zebari, Barham Salih, and leaders of the Kurdistan Islamic parties were expected to compete for top cabinet positions in Arbil and Baghdad following the next elections. Kurdish politicians would compete not only with each other, but also with heavyweight Arab politicians such as Iyad Allawi, Usama al-Nujaifi, Speaker Salih Mutlaq, Nouri al-Maliki, Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, and numerous other Shiite political leaders for top leadership positions.

As US forces started pulling out of Iraq and intercommunal violence escalated, the neighboring states jockeyed to support their favorite proxies in Iraq, raising fears that the country might relapse into another civil

war. Iraqi parliamentarians called on Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia on November 28 to stop meddling in Iraq's internal affairs and inciting communal violence.⁷⁹ Sunni Arab states supported Iraq's Sunnis; Iran supported the Shiite-dominated government; and Ankara streamlined its relationship with the KRG in order to protect its economic and political interests in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸⁰

In view of al-Maliki's support for the al-Assad government, he came under a barrage of criticism from Ankara, accusing him of trying to foment sectarian violence in his country and the region.⁸¹ In response, al-Maliki accused Prime Minister Erdogan of interfering in his country's internal affairs and described Turkey as an unfriendly regional state.⁸² Sonmez Koksai, former ambassador and head of the National Intelligence Service (MIT), told a *Hurriyet Daily News* reporter that "[t]he dramatic events in the neighborhood unleashed many dynamics forcing Turkey to face an equation with several variables. What happens in the Syria-Iraq-Iran triangle will affect Turkey. The Kurdish issue is a factor that could be used against Turkey."⁸³

While pundits speculated that the Kurds were heading toward independence, the Turkmen were holding a high-profile meeting, sponsored by the Human Rights Committee at the European Parliament in Brussels on December 6, 2011, in order to shed light on their human, cultural, and political rights in the context of the Iraqi and KRG constitutions.⁸⁴ While the real purpose of the meeting was unclear, pundits speculated that Ankara might have been behind the meeting in order to firm up its role in Iraqi Kurdistan by using the Turkmen as their proxies in case the situation in Iraq unravels. The Turkmen had long claimed large swathes of Iraqi Kurdistan, including disputed Arabized Kurdish areas, in an effort to create a parallel autonomous region that would stretch from Tel Afar in the northwest to Kirkuk in the center and Mandali in the east of Iraq. In the event of another civil war in Iraq, Turkey might occupy Iraqi Kurdistan under the pretext of preserving regional stability and protecting their Turkmen brethrens.

Ankara feared that the heightened tension between Sunni and Shiite Arabs in the aftermath of the US troop withdrawal from Iraq on December 18, 2011, might lead to Iraq's disintegration and the emergence of a Kurdish state. It might have been partly for this reason that Ankara dispatched its foreign minister Davutoglu to Tehran to press Iran to keep out of the political struggle between Sunni and Shiite Arabs in both Iraq and Syria.⁸⁵ Turkey and Iran might have agreed that it was in both countries' interests to encourage the Shiite rulers in Iraq and Syria to share power equitably with Sunni Arabs in order to avoid a radical shift in the balance of power that might have undesirable regional consequences. It might have

been for this reason that Ankara moderated its rhetoric toward Damascus following Davutoglu's visit to Tehran. However, the Syrian government's negative response to Arab, Turkish, and UN calls for a negotiated end to the conflict led to escalated armed confrontation between government and opposition forces. By February 2012, the daily number of casualties was rapidly increasing due to heavy shelling of heavily populated centers of Damascus, Hums, and Aleppo.

While pressing Tehran not to intervene in the neighboring states' affairs, Ankara strongly backed the KRG not to surrender Iraq's Sunni vice president al-Hashimi, accused of leading a death squad, to Baghdad, angering Iraqi and Iranian officials.⁸⁶ Contrary to positions taken by Baghdad and Tehran that al-Hashimi should face justice, Ankara and the United States wanted his case settled through dialogue. Ankara called on Washington to tighten the screws on al-Maliki, who tried to consolidate his power and marginalize Sunni Arabs.⁸⁷

By taking sides with the United States and Ankara, the KRG might have jeopardized its ties with al-Maliki and Tehran. Amid regional power struggles, the Turkish academician Mensur Akgun opined that Ankara should fine-tune its relations with the KRG and recognize it as a Kurdish state if Iraq unraveled.⁸⁸ He claimed that a stable Kurdish state in northern Iraq would serve Turkey's economic interest and would provide it with a gateway to the south. Murat Bilhan, former Turkish ambassador and an academician, claimed that "powerful economic forces are also driving the relationship between Ankara and the Kurdistan government."⁸⁹ He also claimed that Ankara had a special interest in the oil-rich Kurdish region, which provides a trade route to the Gulf.

Amid the ongoing ethnic and sectarian conflict in the region and colliding US and regional interests, it is incumbent upon KRG officials to recognize their limitations, choose their options and allies carefully, and use their political and economic assets wisely in order to preserve their political and economic gains of the past several years. Without a promissory note from the United States or the United Nations or Turkey, the Kurds will be left to their own devices to deal with their adversaries.⁹⁰ The KRG must be cognizant of the fact that the United States and Turkey have their own broader national and regional interests that might supercede protecting the stateless Kurds. The Kurds might recall Henry Kissinger's infamous statement of 1975 that "[c]overt action should not be confused with missionary work," and that the Kurds were no more than a card to play.⁹¹ However, the regional power realignment following the Syrian uprising in 2011 seems to have brought Iraqi Kurds closer to Ankara and away from Baghdad, indicating that they might be on their way to independence.

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